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What Canst Thou Say?

Friends • Mystical Experience • Contemplative Practice

*You will say, Christ saith this, and the apostles say this: but what canst thou say?
Art thou a child of Light and hast thou walked in the Light, and what thou speakest,
is it inwardly from God? —George Fox*

Spirit-led Action (Supplemental)

Being Led Through Being Misled

Rhonda Ashurst

In the summer of 1994, I was 28 years old and having a crisis. I was working on a degree in mental health counseling. I wanted to help people heal and change their lives. I hoped this would be my contribution to making the world a better place. My first marriage had disintegrated in the last year, and I was already experiencing limits in my ability to help others. It was my first realization that my vision for my life was not going to be my reality.

I had long held a fantasy of running away to Rio de Janeiro. I'm not sure when it started, probably my late teens. In the summer of 1994, I met an older man who rocked my world. He was the manager of a Reggae band I followed. He had a powerful presence and seemed very spiritual and worldly to me.

After neglecting my spiritual life for many years, I was feeling a need to reconnect with Spirit again. This was a time of New Age thinking of philosophy and I had become intrigued with transpersonal psychology. I was participating in meditation groups and spiritually oriented workshops. When Oba and I connected, it felt Spirit-led to me, and we soon moved in together. Quickly we discovered a mutual desire to run away to Brazil.

Within weeks I dropped out of school, gave most of my possessions to the Salvation Army, packed four bags and headed to Miami with Oba to get our visas. This took about a week. Sometime during that week, he told me he needed to help his family in Haiti, which was in crisis at the time. He told me he would meet

me in Rio. I loaned him some money for his trip. I will always remember standing at the gate in the airport saying goodbye to him. As he turned to go, he looked deeply into my eyes and said, "This is for you, to thine own self be true."

A few days later I left for Rio, excited and a little afraid, but I was comforted knowing he would soon join me there and we would begin our new life. It all felt so right, so Spirit-led.

From the Editor:

In this issue we explore leadings from Spirit—how we discerned them, when and why we decided to act, what happened, and what we learned. Often Spirit gives us clarity on our path forward when we are uncertain and asking for help. Spirit can speak to us through inner or outer voices and messages, intuition, inspiration, and synchronistic events and encounters.

—Rhonda Ashurst
Editor for this issue

What Canst Thou Say? (WCTS)

is an independent publication co-operatively produced by Friends with an interest in mystical experience and contemplative practice. It is published in February, May, August, and November. The editorial and production team is Rhonda Ashurst, Muriel Dimock, Lissa Field, George Hebben, Lieselotte Heil, Judy Lumb, Grayce Mesner, Mike Resman, Earl Smith, and Eleanor Warnock.

Tell us your stories! WCTS is a worship-sharing group in print. We hope to help Friends be tender and open to the Spirit. Articles that communicate best to our readers focus on specific events and are written in the first person.

Although there are themes announced for most issues, we accept any expressions of mystical experiences or contemplative practice at any time.

We welcome submissions of articles of less than 1500 words and artwork suitable for black and white reproduction. Please send your text submissions in Word or generic text format and artwork in high resolution jpeg files. Photocopied art and typed submissions are also accepted.

*Send via email to <wctseditors@gmail.com> or hard copy to **Rhonda Ashurst, PO Box 9032, Reno NV 89507.***

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But he never came and soon I realized he just wanted the money and a week 's vacation in Miami. I was crushed. I lay on the floor in my hotel room and wept for three days. How could I have been so deceived, misled? Suddenly I knew nothing and understood less. I felt my whole world crumble.

But I was in Rio! Copacabana and Ipanema were calling me. I found a tour guide and finally went out of the hotel. I quickly learned that I was an anomaly—a young white woman traveling alone in a rough city. My guide taught me how to walk, hold myself, be assertive, not to wear jewelry and what parts of the city were safe.

I was scared being alone without a man, especially in Rio. I realized I always depended on a man to protect and direct me. I thought that was what women do. Suddenly I had to take care of myself in a place where there was real danger, I knew no one and I didn't speak the language. And that's when the magic began...

I would run into someone who spoke English at a street café or on a tour. We would hang out together for a few days until they went home. If I needed help with a transaction like changing money or buying something, someone would show up who could translate. With help, I learned some basic Portuguese. I became keenly aware for the first time that I was held in the arms of something greater than myself. I began to trust this Presence that led me through my unstructured days. I realized I had not allowed myself much unstructured time. In this state of complete openness and vulnerability, I learned to hear and trust Spirit.

I spent six amazing weeks in Brazil – two in Rio and three in Salvador Bahia, the spiritual and artistic center of the country. I met so many wonderful people, made new friends and had powerful mystical experiences and encounters that changed my life and my relationship with Spirit.

At the end of my time in Salvador Bahia, I was clearly led back to the US to finish my degree and work as a counselor. It came to me that if I helped only one person, my work would have been worth it. Looking back on my career now, I know I helped more than one person, even if I didn't change the world as I had hoped was possible in my youth. I also learned that I didn't need a man to survive and thrive. I came to terms with my escapism, discovering that wherever you go, there you are.

Sometimes I wonder if Oba was an angel sent to lead me into this experience that changed and matured me, especially my relationship to Spirit. What first appeared to be misleading turned out to be one of the most transformative leadings of my life. Since then, I have been led by being misled several times. Because of my experience in Brazil, I learned to trust leadings, even if they don't work out as I expect. They eventually lead me to where and with whom I need to be.

Rhonda Ashurst attends the Reno Friends Meeting and edits for WCTS. She writes a blog <rhondaashurst.com>, practices/teaches yoga and Tai Chi, cares for her mother, serves the cat, and enjoys time with her partner, friends, and Spirit.

Saying Yes, While Living into the Calling

Maurine Pyle

I had been meditating in the evening, as was my custom, when suddenly a vision overcame me. I found myself kneeling with the women at the foot of the cross. There were the three Marys, the daughters of Rachel, weeping over their lost child. Slowly I lifted my eyes expecting to see the broken, dying body of Jesus, the symbol of my Catholic childhood. Instead I witnessed a bright light, more luminous and encompassing than anything I had ever experienced. In that single moment my heart was transformed by the great love of Jesus. I feel that I was given a momentary glimpse of the Divine in full glory. I knew that Jesus was indeed the Christ. All my doubts ceased. For the first time, in that moment of pure ecstasy, I became a Christian.

Not long after the vision occurred, I heard the Voice speaking to me again, this time with an insistent and clear message: "Record your ministry." I did not understand what the message meant, and for a long time I ignored it. As far as I knew, under Quaker practice everyone has the ability and responsibility to minister. When the Voice would not relent, I turned to my elder Allie Walton for clarification. She explained to me that the recording of ministry was an ancient practice which had been laid down by most Friends meetings. In earlier times it had been the way for Friends to acknowledge and recognize special spiritual gifts, particularly those of public ministers. Recording offered a process for holding ministers accountable by providing elders to support and guide them in their work.

Notwithstanding the historical precedent, she took my leading seriously and insisted on forming a clearness committee to consider it with other elders from Lake Forest Friends Meeting. After we met for careful consideration of my concern, the committee agreed that I should first present my leading to the meeting.

I felt that I had no choice but to follow their direction, and even though I was scared, I was committed. I knew that the meeting would have to struggle with my request.

The process of hearing my leading engaged the entire community for over a year (1984). I endured criticism, intense questioning and even a few direct

attacks. My request had apparently reopened the wounds of those who had rejected Jesus—"the victims of Christian malpractice" as Dan Seeger has called them. In the latter part of the 20th century, Quaker communities have attracted renegades from many faiths who were wounded or disappointed by their childhood faith communities. Many of them are Christians. These people who heard me witnessing for Jesus, while at the same time making a claim to a vocation in ministry, were deeply unhappy. For a while I was definitely *persona non grata*. I asked God repeatedly to release me from this painful duty, but the message I received was "Accept this time of sacrifice and you will be rewarded later."

One experience particularly stands out in my memory. The business meeting had called a threshing session to give the entire community an opportunity to focus on my leading. As I scanned the room, I noted that a psychologist was present. My first thought was that he had been asked to check the sanity of a woman who hears voices. Mystics can be easily psychologized these days. This was a tense occasion for me. I wanted nothing more than to hide away and never see these people again.

And yet there were times of acceptance of this cross I carried, accompanied by a deep peace. I told them the story of the guidance to record my ministry. It wasn't hard because I had already related it to many people in the room before. There was silence and then someone responded. It was a young Evangelical Quaker who chanced to be visiting us that day. I never forgot his words. He said, "If we feel Maurine's calling is genuine, we should write it on our hearts, affirm it with our lips, and rejoice with her." I wept, moved by his words. To this day I believe he was an angel sent to comfort and encourage me.

A few weeks later the clerk approached me to say that the business meeting could not reach a sense of the meeting regarding my request. I told her that I felt the recording had already taken place since I had done as St. Paul advised, "I will announce your name to my brothers. I will sing your praise in the midst of

the assembly. I will put my trust in him” (*Hebrews 2: 12-13*). After all, recording of ministry was simply meant to be an acknowledgment of the call by placing one’s ministry under the care and guidance of the meeting. I had accomplished recording my ministry. The next step would be to find spiritual guides. That process has taken many years because we have all needed to learn how to guide one another. I still walk this path, less lonely, less afraid. The calling has been proven as genuinely from God. Doubts may still linger, yet my ministry is recorded on the hearts of many.

Reprinted from *What Canst Thou Say February, 2008*

Tribute to Maurine Pyle

Please join us in holding our beloved member, Maurine Pyle, in the light. Maurine passed away on May 21, 2022, at her assisted living facility in Terre Haute, Indiana. Sage Moffett, together with their spouse, Logan Elisha Plummer, have been the local friend and loving caregiver to Maurine since Maurine moved to Terre Haute. Sage held her hand and spoke words of comfort to Maurine as she passed. Friends Dawn Crimson and Tom Hensold had visited Maurine recently, as had her sons, Nick Pyle, Ned Pyle, and a number of friends from Carbondale, Illinois, where Maurine lived until her move to Terre Haute.

Maurine was a member and recorded minister of Southern Illinois Quaker Meeting. Before transferring her membership to Southern Illinois Quaker Meeting, she was a member of Lake Forest Meeting. She served in many roles in the broader Quaker community, including as Clerk and then Field Secretary of ILYM. She had also delivered the Plummer Lecture at ILYM Annual Sessions in 1998.

She had, many years ago, executed a “Five Wishes” document in which she stated, among other things, that, “I wish for my family and friends to know that I do not fear death itself. I think it is not the end, but a new beginning for me...I wish for my family and friends to look at my dying as a time of personal growth for everyone, including me.” She asked to be remembered “as a peacemaker, a follower of Jesus and [as] a loving family member and friend.”

—Jill Adam, Clerk, Southern Illinois Quaker Meeting

Maurine Pyle contributed 21 different articles to *WCTS*. As a tribute to Maurine Pyle, the *WCTS* Editorial Team decided to republish her essays on our two blogs: <quakermystics.wordpress.com> and <worshipsharinginprint.wordpress.com>. A wonderful hybrid Memorial Service was held for Maurine Pyle on September 24, 2022.

The following is a list of her contributions:
St. Louis Cathedral --- February 2020 --(republished June 27, 2022)
I See Sicily Island --- November 2018 --(republished June 27, 2022)
Who is Sitting on the Facing Bench --- August 2017--(republished July 4, 2022)
Quaker Elders I Have Known and Loved --- May 2017---(republished July 4, 2022)
A Visitation from Mother Mary --- February 2017 --(republished July 13, 2022)
My Joy --- November 2016 --(republished July 13, 2022)
What the Grandmothers and Grandfathers Are Saying --- August 2016 (republished August 1, 2022)
God’s Rest Awaits Thee --- May 2016 (republished August 1, 2022)
The Magic Prayer Room --- February 2016 (republished August 8, 2022)
Listening at St. Julian’s Window --- November 2015 (republished August 8, 2022)
Where Have the Kids Gone? --- November 2014 (republished August 15, 2022)
Encountering Mary, Mother of Jesus --- August 2013 (republished August 15, 2022)
A Narrow Way --- August 2010 (republished August 22, 2022)
A Bit of Mind Reading --- August 2008 (republished August 22, 2022)
The Rabbi’s Prayer --- August 2008 (republished August 29, 2022)
Saying Yes, while Living into the Calling --- Feb 2008 (republished August 29, 2022)
The Women Under the Cross --- November 2007 (republished September 5, 2022)
Conversations with Lucifer / Vanity --- November 2006 (republished September 5, 2022)
Stretch Out Your Hands --- May 2004 (republished September 11, 2022)

Please write for *What Canst Thou Say?*



February 2023
Unitive and Numinous Experiences
Editor: Michael Resman

Academics divide mystical experiences into two categories, unitive (being one with everything) and numinous (the presence of the divine). There's debate about whether one is more advanced than the other. Have you known both? How did they differ? How do they fit within your spiritual life?

Deadline: November 15, 2022

May 2023
Angels
Editor: Janice Stensrude

Some of us have reported feeling the presence of angels, some few have reported seeing angels, some have received some miracle in the nick of time, convinced that the mortal helper was an angel appointed by the Divine, and yet others have wondered at their own improbable actions, feeling themselves appointed to an angel's task. Have you seen or felt an angelic presence? Has someone helped you in such a way that you saw the Divine working through them? Have you been the angel in someone else's life?

Deadline: February 15, 2023

August 2023
Refiner's Fire
Editor: Earl Smith

Early Quakers were willing to be changed by the Refiner's Fire (*Malachi 3:2*) which stripped away angers, fear, and ego-centered needs that separated them from God. What is your experience of the Refiner's Fire? When has the Light shown you that you were not in God's will? How has the Refiner's Fire healed you from brokenness or other situations?

Deadline: May 15, 2023

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