



November 2017  
Number 96:1

# 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*

## Spirituality and Sexuality

### Spirituality and Sexuality

Hazel Jonjak

The inspired genius Thoreau declared, “In Wildness is the preservation of the world!” But prudish Henry David questioned, “What was Mother Nature thinking?” as he noted a phallic-shaped stinkhorn fungus. For me, a woman, goddess-focused religion allows me to merge, to descend, into chthonic streams of Connectedness—without embarrassment.

The first time my husband-to-be arrived in the middle of the night, we made love, visions of the Sacred Marriage making orgasm holy. Later David moved on to other sexual liaisons and I felt dashed to the earth, but I carried our child. The Goddess is not sentimental, nor personal. I never say to another suffering Being that God gives only what you can handle. Rather, Life Force presides, and at moments I can find the Goddess within me, or can become Mother Earth—but I don’t expect dispensations. Like Catholics I go to Mary for compassion, and for serenity I attempt Buddhist nonattachment.

A dream some thirty years after my hieros gamos: *In silvers and whites we part; an aluminum panel of the ferry boat upon which we stand separates from the main deck—and David floats on alone.*

This vision signaled my letting go, and came years after the official divorce. The hieros gamos was genuine but not permanent. John Humphrey Noyes, 19<sup>th</sup> century utopian declares, “Every natural birth is ....a miracle.... Perhaps all miracles require the co-operation of male and female....A mysterious sympathy with Mary seems to have perfected Christ’s power. Certain quasi-chemical elements combined, and tremendous force evolved.” Noyes means the Mary of Bethany (of Mary and Martha) that helped in the miracle of raising dead Lazarus. He explained that with great trembling, the masculine force of Jesus and the feminine force of Mary produced this amazing Life-Force embodiment.

In Ojibwemowin the word for “my husband” is *niwiidi-gemaagan*, “the man I walk with,” and is equally valid for

a numinous, spirit-blessed coming-together, as for a life-time commitment. The wild component of sexual attraction enriches potency, and a child born to the Queen of the May is a special gift from the Universe.

When I consider the wilder sexual ecstasy, as well as the more human love-making components of intercourse, I recall my time at a commune off the coast of British Columbia. When I first brought my one-year-old daughter to Galley Bay, the community was practicing open relationships. Gail, the woman most often sought for sexual connection, was the person most deeply grounded in spiritual life. When I returned a year later and asked about Gail, I was told she had committed suicide. And I observed that the group had returned to the comfort and stability of “coupledom.”

So what are the potentials of sexuality which embody the sacred? In my “maiden aspect” of the Goddess, I was a woman vessel through which Life-Force surged and played—with images of waters upon stone, roots merging into peat, ancient Maleness in the form of extinct mastodon entering “Me,” free from human boundaries and institutions. Tentative Self becomes those rhythms of the dark, expands within the Unconscious. The ecstasy of touching or arching Being into the mystery of the “Other” becomes zygote—or not.

*Hazel Jonjak lives without electricity in northern Wisconsin.*

#### From the Editors:

Love is the highest form of sexuality, whether it is expressed as love of God or of another person. The authors in this issue bring all of themselves, including their sexuality, into relationship with Spirit. As usual, we have uploaded a web version <whatcanstthousay.org>.

Betty Brody and Judy Lumb

**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 Muriel Dimock, Lissa Field, Mariellen Gilpin, Judy Lumb, Grayce Mesner, Mike Resman, Pamela Richards, 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 best communicate to our readers focus on specific events and are written in the first person. We welcome submissions of articles 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 **WCTS, 815 9th Street SW, Rochester MN 55902.**

All authors and artists retain copyright to their articles and artwork published in **WCTS**. **WCTS** retains the right to publish initially and to reprint in **WCTS** anthologies.

If you want to reprint an article from **WCTS**, please contact us for permission. We will make every effort to contact the author. If that is not possible, we may grant permission and ask that a copy be sent to the Meeting last attended by the author.

For subscription rates, see the subscription form on page 9. Send subscription correspondence to Michael Resman <wcts.subscriptions@gmail.com> or **WCTS, 815 9th Street SW, Rochester MN 55902.**

## How Do I Know Which Is God?

If I had it all to do over again, what guidelines would I use to distinguish between the sorcerer, that is to say, a human whom I shall call “Spirit Lover”—and God, whom I choose to call “Holy Spirit Lover”? Further, I hope to help others decide what choice is in their own best interest. ...

### **Queries for Distinguishing between God and an Imposter**

- 1) Which chakras are the primary focus of my lover’s attention?
- 2) Does my partner seem to think it important to gain my consent each time we have sex? How is that consent gained?
- 3) Is the partner’s primary focus on connection or disconnection with me as a whole person?
- 4) Does the partner encourage or discourage my co-dependent behaviors?
- 5) To what extent is my trust in my partner well-placed?

This is an excerpt from an article by Mariellen Gilpin that is found in the web version <whatcanstthousay.org>.

## Friendly Mystic Gathering Proceedings

Thanks to the faithful volunteer work of Janice Stensrude, the proceedings of the first three Gatherings of Friendly Mystics are available at <lulu.com>. Search for “What Canst Thou Say” and you will see the proceedings from the first three gatherings of Friendly Mystics, both full color hardback and black ink paperback. They are also available for free download on our website <whatcanstthousay.org/past-gatherings>. Enjoy!

## WCTS Has Two Blogs

1) Quaker Mystics: Gathering for Discernment of God’s Guidance <quakermystics.wordpress.com> was created to support gatherings sponsored by *What Canst Thou Say*, including information about future gatherings and the epistles from past gatherings.

2) Soon after creating the Quaker Mystics blog, the editors found the need for another blog to support the journal *What Canst Thou Say* <worshipsharinginprint.wordpress.com> to publish essays between quarterly issues, or those that didn’t fit in the journal.

If you would like to contribute to either of these blogs, contact Judy Lumb <judylumb@yahoo.com>.

## *I Wonder What Would Happen If....*

*Jennifer Elam*

*With our partners  
We had Meeting for Worship for Sexuality  
On a regular basis?*

## *Blending*

*Mike Resman*

We are capable of experiencing many forms of love. The feelings we have for a friend, grandparent, favorite object or beautiful sight could all be labeled love. When our conscious mind is involved, we clearly distinguish between thousands of our “loves.”

The deeper an emotion goes, the closer it comes to a central sense of love. Our core feelings blend together. Usually the universality of our deep feelings goes unnoticed by us. The tenderness we feel toward a puppy engages some of the same feelings we have for a niece or nephew. This seems natural, both being expressions of our capacity to love.

It can seem wrong, however, when spirituality sparks sexual thoughts, causing us to condemn ourselves. “How could I be so crass (sinful, limited, ....)” could be common thoughts. The cross currents of sex and spirituality can occur whether the spiritual experience was the product of individual prayer or the result of exuberant public worship.

Some would reject this, saying that a religious revival meeting that seemed to result in sexual feelings was unholy and wrong.

But love is love. Intense love sets off a fire in the heart, heating up everything around it. The intimacy, nurturing and ecstasy that can occur with intense individual experiences of God are overwhelming. No one feeling is enough, and the totality can hardly be contained.

Fully engaging with singing can bring the same result. The lyrics can inspire and the tune carry you to the heights where you are flooded with emotions.

At its best, sex includes nurturing, tenderness, joy, love, and ecstasy. At its deepest, spirituality can include nurturing, tenderness, joy, love, and ecstasy. It is no wonder that the two can blend in our limited human hearts.

Medieval women mystics spoke of the Divine as Bridegroom, Intimate, Lover, my Beloved. What they intended in their deepest heart cannot be known. It should not come as a shock when in the midst of an extended prayer, erotic thoughts turn up.

Sex is, after all, one of God’s greatest gifts to humans. A greater gift is our capacity for spirituality. We humans are so limited we may feel we must completely reject one to engage fully in the other.

Instead, there is a right order we can seek, guided always by the question: “What does God want?” We can joyously invite God to be with us in our sexual encounters. Knowing that God knows all and is always present helps keep us intentional about our sex life.

Just as every part of our life can be given over to God, so can sex. We were made human, with all our attendant needs. The command to “Love your neighbor as yourself” has two components. We often focus on the love your neighbor part, but loving ourselves is also vital.

When we reject a part of ourselves, we constrict our hearts. When we then turn to love God and others, our capacity is constrained. We need to accept ourselves and our human needs. This isn’t a license to grab whatever we want. It is an encouragement to embrace ourselves, limited and needy as we are.

*Michael Resman is a member of the Rochester MN Monthly Meeting and co-editor of WCTS. He is working on accepting his own advice.*

# Sexuality and Spirituality—My Spiritual Journey

Betty Brody

“Sexuality and spirituality are complementary aspects of the human individual, and the basic issue overall is personal integration. More specifically, human growth depends on integration of the aspects of the human being: body, psyche—with its “feminine” and “masculine” dimensions—and spirit. Acknowledgement of the distinctively human factor of spirituality introduces explicit concern for fidelity to a built-in movement toward the true and good. The spiritual factor explains the importance of honesty and love in human sexual relationships. Conceived in this way, sexuality and spirituality are complementary aspects of the same phenomenon—human integration and personal growth.

“The whole of the universe is God’s good creation, and the ultimate desire of the human heart is the Creator-God of the universe. So the theist can pray with Saint Augustine, ‘Lord you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.’ Sexual desire is somehow a longing for God.” (Daniel A. Helminiak, 2012. *Sex and the Sacred: Gay Identity and Spiritual Growth*)

I want to share some of my own experiences of sexuality and how this relates to my spiritual journey. When I was in my early twenties, I was invited to my nursing school roommate’s apartment to meet a friend of hers who was having trouble accepting her sexuality. I berated her and told her she should seek relationships with men, not women.

Later, I, along with my first husband, counseled a member of our Quaker Meeting who was assisting in a cultural enrichment program in a black school near our Meetinghouse. Joe was behaving inappropriately with the little boys in the program. We advised him to leave the little boys alone, get married

and have a family. This man was a gifted ballet dancer. We lost touch with him after he married, had a child and left the area.

When I was in my mid-twenties, I was asked by a friend to join her women’s support group. I refused because I said I was afraid to talk about my sexuality.

A little later, while I was working night duty at our community hospital, I had a strange experience. As I was in the elevator, coming home from my long, tiring shift, I noticed a pretty young nurse, wearing a mini-skirt. All of a sudden, I was overwhelmed with sexual desire for her. These thoughts surprised and frightened me. That

---

***Sexuality and spirituality are complementary aspects of the same phenomenon—human integration and personal growth.***

---

night, I had explicit sexual dreams. I told my husband about them, and he told me to forget the dreams and not worry about them. We shortly moved out of the area and life moved on.

A few years later we moved to Botswana, where my husband was working in the field of low income housing. About three years after we moved to Botswana, a friend, Brenda, lost her first baby to crib death. Her family and friends advised her to quickly have another baby and get on with her life. My social worker friend and I knew that we needed to gather a group of women around Brenda to help her grieve. This group of women, from several different countries, gathered in my living room each week for about a year. There, we shared stories we had never shared with anyone else. It was in this room that I heard for the first

time Shelagh saying, “I have been a lesbian all of my life.” I heard myself saying that I had had feelings of sexual desire for women and had never talked about them, except to my husband. Brenda completed her grieving and left for Cape Town with her husband. Shelagh invited me to come to her home to talk about my feelings.

To make a long story short, Shelagh and I fell in love. I left my 17-year marriage, and Shelagh and I began to live together. Shelagh is a Quaker and was born in South Africa. She is 11 years older than me. In the beginning of our relationship, my sexual feelings were almost overwhelming. I thought I had always been lesbian and had just not known it. I prayed more earnestly than I had ever prayed before, asking God to take away our love. He didn’t, at least not then. I felt closer to God than I had ever felt before and experienced my first orgasms.

It was very difficult living and working in Botswana while being in a lesbian relationship. We shared the nature of our relationship with Shelagh’s colleagues, who worked with her in a Quaker Peace and Service Refugee Resettlement project called Kagisong. Unfortunately, they were offended by our relationship and told the members of the Kagisong Board, the Gaborone Botswana Meeting, and the village chief. Kagisong was located in the village of Mogoditshane. Shelagh was told by the village chief that we could not live together any more in the village. We were shunned by the villagers and accused of being witches. Shelagh and I moved into Gaborone, the capital of Botswana, and eventually were offered a servant’s quarters, owned by a Tswana, to live in. During this time, I was a nurse, working in the American Embassy’s Health Unit.

Possibly, because of all the pressure on our relationship, it dwindled to just a deep friendship. A couple of years later, while still living in Botswana, I fell in love with and married my present husband. We have been married for 29 years, and I have remained faithful. I have been in love at least three times, but these relationships were just deep, sexless, intimate friendships with women.

On June 10, 2010, in my first Shalem residency, during a lectio divina exercise, I was deeply moved by this verse from Psalm 139: "It was you who created my inmost self. And put me together in my mother's womb; for all these mysteries I thank you: for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works."

This verse really spoke to me because, for many years, I have struggled with accepting who I am. I have struggled with bringing all I am to God. I have felt that I came into the world by mistake (my mother told me she thought I was a tumor, since my brother was only 4 months old when I was conceived). I have also felt that it was not good that I could love both men and women.

Reading this verse deeply, I see that I was created on purpose, not by accident. God has given me the gift of being able to love both men and women. Since God put me in the womb of a woman (my mother) who was bisexual, it is part of his plan for me to love both men and women. It is God's choice, not mine.

My husband is also part of God's plan for me. My stepson and I have learned that he and I were together, as mother and son, during a life in the Holocaust. In his teen years, he began to write poems about burning in ovens as part of a suicidal depression. After receiving some excellent psychiatric care and hearing, with me, that he and I had been together in that past life and

had died together in the Holocaust and would be fine in this life, he has made a full recovery. He is now a math professor at Goucher, a loving husband and a proud father of an almost-two-year-old daughter.

My Botswana friend, Shelagh, is also part of God's plan for me because our relationship opened me to myself, as a sexual being, and this sexual openness and ability to experience sexual ecstasy extended to my second marriage. It had been absent in the first.

Bisexuality is a gift, not something to be cast aside or to be ashamed of. To remain divorced in my heart from part of myself felt like an amputation. I am praying that God will show me how to use this gift. My sexuality is part of my God-self (made in the image of God-self).

---

*I have struggled with accepting who I am. I have struggled with bringing all I am to God.*

---

For quite a while, I have preferred to address God when praying as "Mother-Father God, all that was, all that is, and all that will ever be." My image of God, of course, is not exclusively male or female, but both! I am made in the image of God and my image of God resonates with my deeper God-self.

Recently I was talking with a friend after our mutual friend died. The friend who died was 93 years old and one of my favorite people in our community. She was an artist, a musician, a writer, and a devoted pacifist. She had a stroke and chose to fast and not drink until she died, three weeks later. I learned after her death that, although she was a mother of four daughters, a grandmother and a great grandmother, she was lesbian and was suffering greatly from unrequited love.

I felt very sad for her and wished that our mutual wall of secrecy had not prevented me from offering support to her.

After her death, I asked to talk with her daughters and shared with them that I had been in love with a woman in Botswana. One of the daughters had a lesbian daughter who is in Gaborone, Botswana, with her partner and their three-year-old son. I thought they might like to meet my former partner, who is now 82, and still lives in Botswana, in Gabane, a village just outside of the capital, Gaborone.

Just knowing that this lesbian family is in Gaborone, working and leading a normal life, brings me great hope and joy. Somehow, knowing they are there helps to heal the wounds from the adverse community response that my partner and I experienced over 33 years ago. If the political climate had been different, Shelagh and I might still be together. We had a little plot of land and were planning to build a little hut and stay together the rest of our lives. I guess God had other plans for us. I have had many educational and spiritual opportunities that I would not have had, had I remained in Botswana with Shelagh.

About 15 years ago, my husband and I moved to Alexandria, Virginia, after living for many years in various countries. We began to attend Alexandria Friends Meeting. As fate would have it, this meeting was discussing their stand on same sex marriages. They had an ad hoc committee to discern the Meeting's position on this issue. I asked the clerk of this committee if I could be on this committee. He denied my request, saying the committee had almost come to a resolution and he didn't want me to muddy the waters. He did agree, however, to hold an open meeting and I was allowed to speak. I shared the story of my relationship with Shelagh with the whole meeting, and was very warmly

received. Many members came up afterwards and embraced me. I finally felt at home in my meeting. A little while later, the meeting approved a minute supporting same sex marriage.

After the meeting my friend Sue invited me to have lunch with her in her home. After a pleasant lunch, Sue began to berate me for my relationship with Shelagh, saying it was not Christian. Then she shared with me that she had had a sexual relationship with her college roommate, Mary, and was still feeling guilty about this.

Now I knew how the gay people I had berated earlier in my life had felt following my harsh criticism. Nevertheless, I was deeply hurt. I kept this hurt inside of me for over a year. I prayed about it and finally, on Easter Sunday, I was moved to write a letter to my friend. It had occurred to me that I needed to ask for her forgiveness because I was not fully present to her angst. I was too wrapped up in my own feelings of rejection and shame. I received a lovely response from Sue, saying she had long ago forgiven me. This was certainly a lesson of karma for me. We do reap what we sew.

“Sexuality is an all-encompassing energy inside of us. In one sense it is identifiable with the principle of life itself. It is the drive for love, communion, community, friendship, family, affection, wholeness, consummation, creativity, self-perpetuation, immortality, joy, delight, humor, and self-transcendence. Sexuality is a beautiful, good, extremely powerful sacred energy, given us by God and experienced in every cell of our being as an irrepressible urge to overcome our incompleteness, to move toward unity and consummation with that which is beyond us. It is also the pulse to celebrate, to give and receive delight.” —Ronald Rolheiser, 2014. *The Holy Longing*.

## Kundalini, Chakras and My Vajra Rising

Betty Brody

In retrospect, I now believe my first kundalini experience occurred 50 years ago, during the birth of my son. Although I was not cold, and had plenty of covers on top of me, my body would not stop shaking for over an hour. I now understand that the physical phenomena which I experienced were examples of Kundalini Vidya.

I thought I had some kind of weird energy system, which would cause me to vibrate, hear sounds, see lights, and sometimes move as if I were having a grand mal seizure. I read some classic texts like *Autobiography of a Yogi*, and suspected that I was in some kind of kundalini process, but realized that I needed help to understand what I was experiencing. I needed a teacher!

I learned more about kundalini when I read the November 2001 issue of *WCTS* on the Kundalini Energy theme. In her article “Giving Birth to the Sun” in that issue, Marcelle Martin described Joan Harrigan’s very helpful intervention in Marcelle’s kundalini rising at a retreat at Patanjali Kundalini Yoga Care (PKYC) in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Marcelle had heard about Joan through several Friends who attended the fall 1995 Kundalini Research Network Conference in Philadelphia. One of these Friends attended one of Joan Harrigan’s PKYC Retreats, and reported to Marcelle how helpful it was. A year later, Marcelle received from this Friend a copy of Harrigan’s first book, *Kundalini Vidya*, and found that it spoke to her condition. On re-reading the book, she understood that PKYC “supported people in whatever spiritual tradition they were called to.” Previously, Marcelle had been concerned that the PKYC path might conflict with her deepening Quaker

journey, so her new understanding was a relief to her.

I wrote to Marcelle, since I had been experiencing signs which I suspected were awakening kundalini. In a short period of time, I was at a PKYC retreat with Joan Harrigan. Now my kundalini stories are in this issue of *WCTS* and I am hopeful that they will help others as much as Marcelle’s story helped me. I am grateful to *WCTS*, Marcelle and Joan Harrigan for helping me to learn more about kundalini. As has been said many times, “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.”

Kundalini may be defined spiritually as, “the inner sacred Light and Guide that inspires, leads and transforms every human being, and the indwelling Holy Spirit, the source of our spiritual awareness, yearning and understanding. It guides us to our destiny, the One.”<sup>1</sup>

My process was evaluated by PKYC as a blocked Vajra rising, which I was born with. Vajra is the nadi, or energy bundle in the spinal cord that begins in the genital chakra, goes down to the root chakra then up to the crown chakra. The word “chakra” means energy wheel. There are six chakras along the spinal cord, relating to the different organ systems.

Since a Vajra rising is related to the genital chakra, it is not surprising that I experienced physical and emotional sexual phenomena due to a blocked Vajra or genital rising. From

---

<sup>1</sup>Joan Shivarpita Harrigan, *Stories of Spiritual Formation: The Fulfillment of Kundalini Process—Modern Seekers, Ancient Teachings*. Knoxville, Tennessee: Shakti Press. This book is reviewed in the web version by Betty Brody.

# Magic Hollow

Helen Weaver Horn

age 12, when I began menstruating, I experienced very heavy, painful menses. I miscarried a baby at six months of pregnancy. I have had two ovarian cysts and two Bartholin cysts. I finally had a hysterectomy at age 32 due to uterine hemorrhage.

I was married for 17 years, and although I loved my first husband, I was unable to experience sexual orgasm. Emotionally, this may have been due to the fact that we were childhood sweethearts and had grown up as Southern Baptists. We were virgins when we married at age 20 and 21, although we had been dating since I was 13 and he was 14. Perhaps I had held back so long that I was unable to let go after our marriage.

When I was 38, I fell in love with a Quaker woman in Botswana. I don't think this same-sex relationship was related to my Vajra rising, but the fact that I was able to experience full-body sexual orgasms in this relationship was pretty overwhelming. This relationship lasted three years and felt like a marriage.

It was after this relationship ended that I fell in love with and married my husband of 30 years, and began traveling with him to Egypt, Italy, Hungary, Cambodia, and Ukraine.

In 2004, I began a six-year consultation with Joan Harrigan of PKYC. She was my spiritual director and worked along with Swami Chandrasekharanand Saraswati, her teacher and head of a 500-year-old Indian kundalini lineage. Through guided yogic postures, prayers and self-evaluation during several retreats at the Knoxville Center, my blocked Vajra rising was unblocked. Joan and Swamiji told me that I had achieved Makara, thereby unblocking my Vajra rising. Makara is in the upper part of the chakra we call Ajna or the third eye. Reaching Makara means that the path is clear to achieve Bindu, the point of Oneness or self-illumination. Swamiji and Joan have advised me that the path kundalini has chosen to take within me is from Makara to Hrit Padma, near the heart chakra or the Sacred Heart.

*Betty Brody is a member of Alexandria Friends Meeting, in Virginia, but for seven years has been sojourning at Sandy Spring Friends Meeting in Sandy Spring, Maryland. She is an alumna of The School of the Spirit, a spiritual director, and she and her husband are residents in the Friends House Retirement Community in Sandy Spring. She enjoys playing in a recorder trio, singing in two choirs and creating non-functional clay sculptures.*

Like many, I am aroused to awareness by close contact with the natural world. The uniqueness of each kind of plant and the fragrance of many, the mystery of rock outcroppings, the special shapes of trees and their quivering leaves, the wet sheen of fish—how Creation quickens our wonder and joy! How the touching of my husband's naked body shivered my timbers! It connected me deeper yet with the Life Source unfolding around us as we caressed and mated.

*After our woods walk up the stream bed  
on this end of summer day, I come  
to bed with you as to a magic hollow.  
Your length beside me is a rock cliff  
carved by water. I run my hand  
along your chiseled edges,  
feeling your shadowed cool.  
Where our feet touch spring up  
bright orange toadstools and my nipples  
swell like crimson berries in the gloom.  
Your fingers find me, printing my skin  
with tracks distinct as young raccoon in sand.  
Sensation flips like fishes in the shallows,  
startles up like peepers in the leaves.  
We are two salamanders, curling,  
stretching, rolling in the ooze, now darting  
under, wriggling out again.  
Our casings peel like chestnuts.  
We are polished ripeness, bursting  
like the seedpods, bounty flying!*

*Helen Weaver Horn is a member of Athens Friends Meeting, Ohio. She has woven her way through teaching, counseling, peace activism, family life and the givenness of writing poems for some 55 years. "Magic Hollow" was written in 1986.*

## Following the Breadcrumb Trail: Lovingly Doing My Best

Mariellen Gilpin

Some years ago, I told a spiritual director I was praying for an intimate relationship with God. She shot me a very direct look and said, “I can tell you are happily married. Only someone happily married would seek an intimate relationship with God.” I think about that often, because her words have provided me with a trail of breadcrumbs to help me understand my evolving relationship with God.

When I was growing up in the church of my childhood, we were taught to memorize the Lord’s Prayer and recite it in unison. I wanted to reflect deeply on the meanings and be open to new understandings as I recited it. I wanted to be honest to God. Our Friend Pat McBee suggested recently that wanting really to mean the words of a set prayer is something a natural-born contemplative might do. (Pat McBee, 2017. “Phases of Prayer over a Lifetime” in *Immersed in Prayer*. Mike Resman, ed.,

I’d always hesitated to pray with a mantra, because I felt sure I wouldn’t be able to pray with meaning while on autopilot, so to speak. Then about a decade ago, I began praying with a mantra, one that evolves over time. The evolution of my mantra has been a process I’ve been happy with.

One of the breadcrumbs on my trail has been noticing afresh how my husband and I go about our days, each focused on our task whatever it might be, but one of us will say something

like, “There’s the sweetie!” And the other might respond, “Adored fella!” Not a whole lot of cognitive content in those phrases. Nothing requiring reflection. Just a great deal of celebration of our emotional closeness. I’ve come to understand that mantra-praying is basically love-talk with God, celebrating a sense of God’s nearness and dearness—as Brother Lawrence said, “practicing the presence of God.”

It remains important to me to be authentic with God. But I’m rather more relaxed about it now. Yesterday I spent most of the day doing veggieduty, cooking and preserving fresh garden goodies. I went about those chores mantra-ing while I worked—except when my almost-77-year-old knees twinged at just the wrong moment. Then I’d let fly what my husband calls a wifely imprecation.

When mantra turns into imprecation in an instant, it’s like being married: I love God passionately, and it’s neat when I get to speak passionately to God. But when I’m carrying out the garbage with sore knees, I’m focused on the task. I don’t love God or my husband less when I’m doing the chore. It’s that my love is both a feeling and a fact. When I carry out the garbage, I’m doing love. God and I both understand my love undergirds my choices. I’m honestly committed to loving and serving and pleasing God as best I can—passionately sometimes but always the best I can. My husband knows I don’t love him any less when I’m frustrated, and God doesn’t take it personally either. I am content to do my best lovingly.

*Mariellen Gilpin is one of WCTS Editors. This message was spoken in worship August 6, 2017.*

## Book Review: A Seal upon the Heart

Michael Birkel, 2016. *A Seal upon the Heart: Quaker Readings in the Song of Songs*. Pendle Hill Pamphlet #438. Wallingford PA: Pendle Hill Publications. Reviewed by Judy Lumb.

Somehow I missed the connection between sexuality and sin. Instead I have always had a connection between spirituality and sexuality. When the Friends hymnal was published, I was surprised to learn that there was a lot of discussion about whether to include *In the Garden* because some on the committee thought it was too erotic. My reaction was, “That’s probably why I like it so much, its intimacy.” For the same reason *Song of Songs*, one of the least known books of the Bible, has great appeal for me. In this Pendle Hill Pamphlet, author Michael Birkel has explored the way the wonderful lyrical love poems of *Song of Songs* have been used by early Quakers.

“*Song of Songs* stands as unique among the books of the Bible. This collection of love lyrics, candid in their sensuality and profoundly poetic in their imagery, has attracted lovers of God across the centuries.”

*Song of Songs* is written in a female voice addressed to the Christ as her lover. It begins: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth! For your love is sweeter than wine, your scented oils are fragrant, your name is perfumed oil poured forth, therefore the young women love you. Draw me after you! Let us run! The king has brought me into his chambers.” (*Song of Songs* 1:1-4)



Birkel writes, "Old love songs never die, not the good ones. To endure, they must be specific enough to portray concrete affection and also flexible enough to invite hearers to apply the words and images in their own experience of love."

Here's an image: "My beloved is to me a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts." (*Song of Songs* 1:13)

He describes *Song of Songs* as "wonderfully playful. It is simultaneously so suggestive yet restrained that to interpret it too fastidiously is to risk spoiling its beauty, which relies so much on its ambiguity."

As scripture, Birkel wonders how *Song of Songs* made its way into the Bible. Some say it happened by mistake, but a happy mistake for us. It is a "powerful metaphor for the love between God and the spiritual community or between God (or Christ) and the soul."

Early Quakers used images from *Song of Songs* to express their ecstasy at their experience of the inward Christ. Birkel writes, "For Isabel Fell Yeamans, daughter of Margaret Fell, the *Song of Songs* provided language to describe the experience of early Friends that the long wait was over and that God was available directly. The soul's beloved has come again, in an inward, spiritual manifestation."

Yeamans writes, "Blessed be our God forever, who turned us ... to the light of Christ Jesus, which gave us the knowledge of our beloved, and directed our feet into the right way. So it was by the inshinings of his light and grace in our hearts, that we received the discovery and knowledge of our beloved, as he was to the spouse of old."

John Burnyeat writes of being gathered in worship and receiving the divine kiss. "The sweetness of it did wonderfully engage our souls to love him and to wait upon him. For we did find the ancient experience of the church true, as testified in the scripture, because of the savour of thy good ointments, thy name is as ointment poured forth, therefore do the maidens love thee. ... We grew more and more into an understanding of divine things and heavenly mysteries, through the openings of the power in our hearts, which still united us more and more unto God, and knit us together in the perfect bond of love."

Sarah Blackborrow writes, "Into my mother's house you all may come, and into the chamber of her that conceived me, where you may embrace, and be embraced of my dearly beloved one. Love is his name, love is his

nature, love is his life. Surely he is the dearest and the fairest."

*Song of Songs* is awash with fragrances. Birkel writes, "The experience of divine presence can be like a fragrance. As with a rich aroma, it feels impossible to describe adequately. The scent is compelling, intoxicating, transporting—and fleeting. ...

"Even the faintest memory ... arouses desire, ... as stepping into a house where bread is freshly baked stirs the appetite. Like the lovers in the *Song of Songs*, the soul yearns for its beloved. ... Longing becomes tranquillity. We are content to wander in unknowing and unsaying. The poetry of the *Song of Songs*, in which love is aroused yet its consummation is never directly described, is an apt vehicle for this unsaying. The amorous fragrances point beyond themselves and dissolve into mystery."

## SUBSCRIPTION FORM

Please send this form to: WCTS c/o Michael Resman, 815 9th Street SW, Rochester MN 55902

Enclosed is my check to *What Canst Thou Say?*

\_\_\_\_\_ \$ 12 for a one-year subscription \_\_\_\_\_ \$20 for two years

\_\_\_\_\_ \$ 5 for a one-year electronic subscription

\_\_\_\_\_ \$ 70 for a complete set of back issues to the most current

\_\_\_\_\_ \$ 15 for any set of 20 issues (1-20, 21-40, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_ \$ 1.50 for individual past issues

Enclosed is a contribution of \$ \_\_\_\_\_

I cannot afford \$12, enclosed is \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

## Please write for *What Canst Thou Say?*



February 2018

### **Nudges**

Editor: **Earl Smith**

“Take heed, dear Friends, to the promptings of love and truth in your hearts. Trust them as the leadings of God whose Light shows us our darkness and brings us to new life.” (*Quaker Faith and Practice, Britain Yearly Meeting, 1955*). How has God been nudging you into faithfulness? Did you write a letter after days of uneasiness and find it changed the debate? Did you “happen” to call a friend just when she needed you? God is ever guiding us—what nudges have you experienced?

Deadline: November 15, 2017

May 2018

### **Other Lives**

Editor: **Rhonda Ashurst  
with Judy Lumb**

Do you sense you had an earlier life—perhaps a dream set in another time and place, in which you are someone else? Have you met someone, or been in a place or a culture, unfamiliar and yet eerily familiar? Have you experienced yourself in another lifetime, another personality? Is there work in this life that began in an earlier life? Is your work now enhanced (or not) by your sense of an unfinished task from that earlier life?

Deadline: February 15, 2018

August 2018

### **Angry with God**

Editor: **Mike Resman**

*“The arrows of the Almighty find their mark in me, and their poison soaks into my spirit. God’s onslaughts wear me away. ... Oh how shall I find help within myself? The power to help myself is out of my reach.”*  
—Job 6: 4,13

Have you been angry with God? Why did you become angry with God? How was your anger with God resolved? How has your anger with God altered your spiritual experience? Have you been able to let go of your anger with God? What has helped you do that?

Deadline: May 15, 2018

## **What Canst Thou Say?**

WCTS c/o Michael Resman  
815 9th Street SW  
Rochester MN 55902

*Address Service Requested*



*Spirituality and  
Sexuality*