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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*

Trials and Temptations (Supplemental)

Finding Our Way

David Blair

In the summer of 1968, I walked across the Pyrenees from France to Spain, starting in the French town of St. Jean Pied de Port and ending on the Spanish side at the monastery of Roncesvalles. I walked this route because I love walking in mountains and these mountains aren't too high. I knew the story of Roland, the nephew of Emperor Charlemagne, who was killed in that pass fighting a rear guard action against the Moors, or ambushed by Basque shepherds, whichever story you choose to believe.

I repeated the round trip twice that summer and once again in the mid-1970s with Linda. I had no idea that I was retracing the steps of hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who, for centuries, have been traveling the great pilgrimage route, the Camino de Santiago, the Road of Santiago, that leads from all points in Europe to Campostela in northwestern Spain, where the relics of St. James are buried. Most of those pilgrims crossed the Pyrenees through the pass I walked in 1968. Like those streaming to "the mountain of the Lord's house" in Micah 4, they walked, no matter what their nationality and station in life, "in the name of the Lord our God."

In the 1990s I learned about the Camino and in 1998 went on pilgrimage to Campostela. I was seeking God's help to find direction in my life and to lay down burdens of grief, anger, and shame that I no longer wished to carry. It felt important to walk again across the Pyrenees and to keep going.

I had only a short time to complete the trip though, as I was due back in France in 10 days from the day I left France. I would not be able to complete the 500 mile trip on foot and so left hoping I'd be able to cover the distance by hitchhiking.

On my first day out I left the main route to look for Urculu, an ancient Celtic monument that I remembered from 1968. Following a topographical map, I labored up a mountain slope in the bright sun. My backpack was heavy and I was very tired. Each time I thought I was at the crest, another slope appeared. I began to fear I was lost. I was a little scared. I stopped and prayed for help, admitting that

I really didn't know where I was and couldn't do this on my own. Shouldering my backpack again, I struggled up another slope and as I came over the top, there was Urculu right in front of me.

That evening I arrived at Roncesvalles in Spain. The next morning pilgrims heard a pilgrim's mass in the chapel and we set out to the south and west. Over the next week, I walked many miles through the heat of a Spanish summer. I also hitched and, on one occasion, took a train.

One afternoon I walked into a village and stopped to have lunch. Talking with a Spaniard at the café, I told him I was on my way to Campostela and was hitchhiking part of the way. He was indignant. "You're not a real pilgrim if you're not walking all the way!"

I left the village doubting myself and this journey. Was it OK that I was taking rides from others? Was my pilgrimage not a pilgrimage? The day's walk was particularly long and steep and I arrived very tired at a hostel that houses pilgrims near the city of Burgos. A young woman opened the door to my knock. I asked her if I could stay the night,

From the Editor:

Trials and temptations fit well together, for they seem to arrive one after the other. Temptations are trials; and trials often provide temptations. As these stories show, they can also be openings that bring us closer to God. This is the first time we have had several authors send multiple stories. This web version available at <whatcanstthousay.org/extras.html> includes additional stories that are not in the print version.

Michael Resman

What Canst Thou Say? (WCTS)

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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.

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and felt obliged to go on at some length about the fact that I wasn't walking the entire route, had hitched part of the way, wasn't sure I was entitled to stay there, etc., etc.

She looked me in the eye and asked: "Are you a pilgrim?" I was silent. Stunned for a moment. "Yes, I am." "Please come in then!" That evening, after a shower and dinner, I sat on my own with my back to a big stone, facing the sunset, and cried. Yes, I am a pilgrim. I have as much right to this journey as anyone else. And it took a very wise young woman to cut through all my stories about myself and to teach me an important lesson.

I did reach Campostela and enter the great cathedral. The journey there was at least as important as the destination: the people I met and what they taught me. I did get back to France in time for the two week retreat where, for the first time, I felt God's love and mercy so powerfully and undeniably that my life was changed. The pilgrimage to Campostela was prelude to the retreat and in some way prepared the ground for what was to come.

I had been lost in the mountains, helpless and asking for help. Help came immediately. Later, lost in my mind and assailed by doubts about my own purpose and integrity, help came again from a young woman who opened the door to the inn. God is always beside us, ready to answer our prayers if only we can pray them. Psalm 32 says: "I will instruct you and teach you the way you should go. ... Steadfast love surrounds those who trust in the Lord."

I had not always known this. However, at very important moments of choice in my life, I had already experienced a clarity that came after endless listing of the pros and cons—a clarity that had nothing to do with the comparing of lists, but rather came from being

in nature, sitting or walking, and somehow being open to guidance. When the guidance came, I no longer doubted the way. I heard no voice and saw no sign, I simply knew what to do. So it was with my choice to get married in 1971, and again when in 1987 I had to choose between job offers in Turkey or in the Philippines. God had entered my life by 2008, when, a year after Linda's death, I asked Lina to marry me. Then I did know that I was praying, and I knew where the guidance came from.

God is by our sides to help us choose what to do and who to be as we walk through life. In Matthew 7 we read: "Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you." We do need to ask, to search, to knock. It is so easy to forget this, to think that "I can do this on my own." It is humbling to admit that I cannot. It is healthy to be humbled!

And what of the times when there is not a clear choice in front of us? It is one thing to choose between getting married or not; whether or not to change careers, or to move from one community to another. These can be very agonizing choices, but at least they are ones we can make.

What of situations where we don't have the power to make the decision? We've all seen painful things happen in our families, communities, churches and country. Good people can do and say things that cause so much harm to others, often unconscious of the impact of their actions and why they are acting this way. We are sometimes among those "good people" doing harm. And sometimes we sit to the side wondering, "What can I do? How must I behave in this situation?"

This question comes to me often as I see my own government acting in ways profoundly harmful to human life and dignity, and so contrary to the

principles we stand for as a nation. I can feel so helpless. What can I do?

In these situations, I come back to a teaching from Meister Eckhart, a German monk and mystic who lived from 1260 to 1328. He said: "Jesus is much more interested in your love than in your accomplishments." "God isn't interested in what you do, but only in the quality of love and devotion which supports your actions."

There are situations where we appear to have no power to do anything to change the course of events, even when it is clear to us that those events are leading to a very unhappy conclusion. But we are never without power to be love in the world, to allow God's love to shine through us, to be as much like Jesus as we can be. As imperfect as those efforts will be, they are powerful.

When we need guidance, we turn to God. We hear James say: "If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you. But ask in faith, never doubting." We ask in faith, and we receive in faith, never doubting, always open to new guidance. We may be guided to particular actions, or we may not. We remember always that the most powerful thing we can do, and the starting point for all other action, is to be the light in the world that God intends us to be.

The young woman at the inn wasn't interested in what I had done and not done. She was interested in who I am. Are you a pilgrim? Yes, I am.

David Blair lives in rural NH, has taught in the public schools and co-founded and directed the Mariposa Museum and World Culture Center in Peterborough, NH. Between 1985 and 1993 he lived in China, the Philippines and Vietnam. The inner journey has taken him to even more amazing places.

Aunt Gentle

David Blair

On January 4, 1991, Linda and I and our two children arrived in Hanoi, Vietnam, where we lived and worked for two and a half years. We moved into a private home rented from the son of Bac Hien, whose name translates as "Aunt Gentle".

Bac Hien was a widow with five children. Her husband had been killed in the last hour of the 11-day Christmas bombing of Hanoi in December, 1972. My country's Christmas present to Bac Hien was widowhood, a terribly difficult life bringing up five children in postwar Vietnam without a husband. Linda and I wondered how Bac Hien would accept us.

Anna's birthday is on January 8. It just so happened (if you believe in coincidence) that this was also the day, in the Vietnamese lunar calendar, of the death of Bac Hien's husband. On this day, she and her children, and now her grandchildren, went to his grave in the country, swept and cleaned around it, and brought him an offering of special red rice.

That evening, Bac Hien appeared at our house with her grandchildren. She brought us some of that red rice, and with it a birthday cake that she had bought for Anna. Linda and I were almost speechless at this act of generosity, love, and forgiveness.

I have since seen that, just as Linda and I needed to know that we, as Americans, were forgiven, so Bac Hien had been waiting all those years, 19 years, to be able to forgive. Who made it possible for an American family to move into her house with a daughter whose birthday fell on her husband's death day? This was God. God didn't force Bac Hien to forgive us, but God did create the conditions for grace, amazing grace, to appear in all our lives.

A Good Supper

Ken Southwood

An incident stayed in my mind from the time of the blitz. I was fifteen, a messenger boy, with a steel helmet, and got to go out during the raid, finding an unexploded hi-explosive bomb, dousing incendiary bombs and dismantling an unexploded one, seeing burning houses, and hearing bombs, shrapnel, and incendiaries falling and able to tell the difference from the sounds. I was thrilled by everything, able to be part of it. But this incident was different. Our house was subdivided into three, our part, naval Lieutenant Basset's part, and Aunt Flossy's part. When a siren sounded but the raid was quiet, Uncle Bill, Lieutenant Bassett, and I would gather at the front door and discuss the war.

Lieutenant Bassett, our tenant, had assured us that he was not the heroic type, being a cook, up from the ranks, in charge only of the kitchens at the naval barracks. Nevertheless, he had strong opinions about Germans. These were that no prisoners should be taken; Jerries were swine, to be shot at sight. He expressed these opinions forcefully. One night, in the early hours, the front doorbell rang. Dad went, to find two Naval police who wanted to speak to Lieutenant Bassett. Later, dressed, he left with them, not coming back until the following afternoon. Our conversation buzzed with speculation.

The next night, when Lieutenant Bassett, Uncle Bill, and I stood in the front door during an uneventful air raid warning, Uncle Bill asked "Well, what wuz that 'bout, las' noight, then?" Lieutenant Bassett looked thoughtful and told us, slowly, that the Navy had sunk a U-boat in the Channel and had later found German sailors afloat in the water. They had picked them up and brought them in to Plymouth late at night. They had not eaten, so he was

called out to feed them. In the middle of the night.

This was a confrontation. “Well, then,” asked Uncle Bill, “wha’d you do?” Lieutenant Bassett looked a little abashed. “Well,” he said, “I never saw such a sorry-looking lot of fellows in all my life. Wet through, all wrapped in blankets. They looked like drowned rats. Miserable faces, all of ‘em. Prisoners. Well, I just called the lads out and we cooked ‘em a good supper of Devonshire pasty.”

Pasty was our local staple. Never forgot it.

Never Again

Ken Southwood

Our son Andrew was eleven, and he asked Janet for a gun. She, of course, wanted to avoid such things and tried to dissuade him, but he was adamant. Other boys had guns (twenty-twos?), why couldn’t he? Janet tried again, but had to rethink this problem. Then she thought of Bill Brooks. Andrew liked him and Bill might be knowledgeable with guns and persuasive. So Bill agreed to speak to Andrew. The result was that he promised Andrew that, when he was twelve, Bill would show him how to shoot a shotgun.

On the day that he was twelve Andrew woke and announced, “Today, today! Bill is going to show me how to shoot a gun.” With Ken, the two went out north of town and, once clear of suburbs, cut off into a side road and then onto what was not much more than a track. Bill loaded the shotgun and showed Andrew how to hold it and press the trigger. Andrew stood firm, aiming up over the field, Bill behind him. BAM! Bill held him so that he wasn’t blown over backwards. Andrew rubbed his shoulder, now

understanding recoil, and Bill picked up an old can lying nearby. Giving it to Andrew, he told Andrew to throw it up in the air. Andrew threw it and Bill shot at it. The can jumped and went flying off, landing by the side of the track.

“OK,” said Bill, “pick it up and we’ll try again.” While he reloaded, Andrew went and picked up the can. But as he brought it back, red liquid dripped onto his hand. He looked at this, wondering, and with Bill, looked inside the can to see how this could have happened. Inside the can there were the remains of a nest of baby mice.

That was it for Andrew. He never again asked for a gun.

In the Spirit of Nonviolence

Ken Southwood

We were in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in 1976. My wife Janet and I went to an open-fronted Indian restaurant, received our meals and sat lunching at the food on our banana-leaves. Suddenly two young Indian men rushed into the restaurant and sat at a small table next the wall. Soon after, three Malay men dashed in, rushed up to the Indians and started to shout and hit them. Everybody in the restaurant leapt to their feet and ran outside. Suddenly the restaurant was empty. Except for Janet and me. The staff all retreated to the kitchen, waiters peeping over the high counter at what was happening.

Two of the Malays each had an Indian head under his arm and were pummeling the Indians’ backs. The other Malay was older, and with a headcloth which indicated he was

probably from the more traditional east coast of the peninsula, where ethnic politics was stronger. Might he have a kris? There had been bad riots in Kuala Lumpur seven years earlier, when many Chinese had been killed.

I told Janet she had better go outside, but I sat there, wondering what I might do in the spirit of nonviolence. I was a white man, in a non-white country. Fifteen years previously I had been a government servant. I got up and walked over to the wall, conscious of the Indian heads poking up over the counter. I put my hand on the older man’s shoulder and said in Malay, “This is not good. Why are you doing this?” He looked back and shrugged my hand off his shoulder.

I put it back again and repeated what I had said, any other Malay words failing me. It was many years since I had spoken it regularly. Again he shrugged my hand off. There was no way I could get between the men. I should probably have stood off where he could see me, watching. But I decided on behaving “normally,” which meant eating. So I went back and sat at my table and resumed eating, while the melee went on, feeling a bit silly, but serious about this.

After a while the three Malays went out and I got up and followed them. They got into a car, shouting in Malay, “Don’t call the police! We are May 13 men!” (May 13 being the date of the riots in 1969.) I looked after them and shouted, in English, “Are you threatening us?” Wrong. I should have stayed silent.

We all went back into the restaurant. I spoke to the two Indians but they didn’t want to talk. I looked at the waiters. They were probably thinking it was English sang-froid, if they knew of such a thing. Janet and I sat and finished our lunch.

Practicing Equality in Malaya

Ken Southwood

In 1958 I was a government servant in Malaya, appointed by the British Colonial Office in 1951. I had gone as a land surveyor. While stationed just north of Singapore, Janet and I attended a small Quaker worship group there. Tom and Nan Elliott, Friends much appreciated for their work for Singaporeans, became close friends. Malaya had become independent in 1957, but Britishers were asked to stay on while Malaysians were trained to take our places.

I was a District Surveyor with nine survey parties in the field. The surveyor in charge of each might be Malay (Muslim), Chinese (Buddhist), or Indian (Hindu), speaking English as his second tongue. Each party had five Malay, Muslim, laborers, ranging from semi-skilled to unskilled, mostly peasants speaking only Malay. I had some training in Malay but it was incomplete. British District Surveyors had apparently not been expected to speak it particularly well. I had learned more in the field.

One of the surveyors came to me one day and told me that the surveyors had a problem with me. I was concerned and asked what. Well, he said, when the laborers had a problem which needed dealing with by, or through, the District Surveyor, they would tell their surveyor and he would speak to the District Surveyor. But since I had come there, the laborers had found that they could just come and speak directly to me, and so the surveyors didn't know what was going on.

Not quite what I had expected – if I expected anything in particular. I thanked him for the information. But it became a fond memory. Apparently

the laborers felt that I would listen and understand their problems and, if I could, do something about it. But I was puzzled that I was that different. Was I? And, in the end, was I not just being paternalistic? (At 35?)

Nothing Tu Du

Ken Southwood

In 1958 I was out visiting a surveyor on the edge of the Malayan jungle. I found the path off the road, parked, and started walking through brush. After awhile the land was cleared and there was a Malay house ahead, on its three-foot stilts. But next to it was a shed—very unusual. As I neared it I saw a metallic glint and looked inside. There was a machine, even more unusual. It seemed to be a one-man plow. I walked on, musing this.

After I had seen the survey party, I returned, once again past this mysterious machine. On my way out through the footpath I met a white man coming in. He didn't look right. As we neared each other he said, "Morning!" and

passed me. No! Out here if I ever saw another white man (which was never) we would want to know what each other were doing there. So I turned and called to him. I was right. He was from Singapore, dressed inappropriately for the bush. He was Swedish and worked for a Danish export-import company. They were trying out the one-man plow, a kind of prototype Roto-Tiller (of which I had never heard) designed in Japan and made in Ceylon.

He listed the problems they expected—fuel, oil, maintenance, repairs, and just the daily usage for a peasant unused to any help plowing, even from an ox or water buffalo. Then he said, with his delightful Swedish lilt:

"Well, prroblemms, prroblemms, if there were no prroblemms, there would be nothing tu du!"

I woke the other day with the word "problems" on my mind. And I remembered his words. Our lives, our whole economy, is founded on problems. Without problems there would be nothing tu du.

Ken Southwood is a member of San Antonio Meeting. He has a long history with AFSC and community work.

WCTS Has Two New Blogs!

"Quaker Mystics: Naming the Spiritual Condition of the World" is the blog of the organizers of the WCTS-sponsored Second Annual Gathering.

<quakermystics.wordpress.com>

"What Canst Thou Say? Worship-Sharing in a Blog" —We invite Friends to share in this blog by commenting on our posts or by offering your writing for posting.

<worshipsharinginprint.wordpress.com>

Reflections of a Monthly Meeting Assistant Clerk

Mary Satterfield

As the first year of my two-year tenure as Monthly Meeting Assistant Clerk draws to a close I've been reflecting on the events that have transpired. This past year has been a rich one, with gifts and challenges that I could never have expected or anticipated.

When I was approached to serve as Assistant Clerk, with the expectation that I would transition to Presiding Clerk after two years, I went through what I expect are the usual protestations, "Who me? I'm too inexperienced. I'm too busy. I'm not seasoned enough. I don't know Quaker process well enough. I'm not spiritual enough."

In my more calm moments I reflected that this must be what Mary, the mother of Jesus, must have felt like—and then I laughed and was able to take the question less seriously for a short time! How seriously I take myself sometimes—so seriously that for a moment I considered a request to serve as Meeting Clerk as analogous to the annunciation!

However, I did decide that there were certain parallels and that I could learn from Mary's response. If indeed I were being called to this, then I would do so with a glad heart, full of praise for the opportunity to serve God through my community. My anxiety over the decision eased for a while, even though a decision hadn't been made.

After a time of prayerful discernment I was still uncertain and without an answer. I attended Meeting for Worship and listened as hard as I could, but with no feeling of satisfaction, no clear answer one way or the other. Disappointed and with mounting concern, I went to the social hour,

feeling alienated from those who had no idea of the important decision I was wrestling with—taking myself too seriously again!

I ran into a friend on the Nominating Committee, one of the few who knew that I had been asked to be Clerk. He did not ask about my pending decision or about anything at all, which turned out to be the perfect response to my fretful heart. With other friends all around us ignorant of my inner turmoil, his silence and acceptance enabled me to hear myself speak as I listed all the reasons why I couldn't be clerk.

If indeed I were being called to this, then I would do so with a glad heart, full of praise for the opportunity to serve God through my community.

To my surprise as I listened to myself, the reasons sounded feeble and inadequate. I later realized what a gift this one-sided conversation had been, and that it was a wonderful example of listening to the inner teacher. I knew the answer but didn't always have the ears to hear it.

Still troubled and uncertain, my husband and I went to dinner at another couple's house. I had told these close friends of my quandary—taking myself too seriously again! I knew I had their support, whatever decision was made. I was also certain of their holding our Meeting and me in the Light through this process. We had a delightful time together, although I was decidedly distracted.

After our meal my friend offered to play the piano for us. I was still inwardly distracted, and the beauty of the music came as a shock and a balm to my troubled soul. Her playing was imperfect, the piano was old, and yet the music was the perfect antidote to

my restless and troubled spirit. I felt bathed in light as I sat there and began to soak in the music and peace. The answer came not in words but in the peace and gratitude I felt for the gift. Not me but thee, O Lord, I prayed. And so the decision was made.

According to the Manual of Procedures (MoP) the roles of the Assistant Clerk include selection of the Queries for each month, maintenance of an updated version of the Manual of Procedures, and supplying an update for the BYM Interchange.

Sounds simple, and it really is. However I think the simplicity belies the riches inherent in the duties. After a conference with our Meeting secretary to learn where she saw changes needed in the MoP, I have begun to make the rounds of the committees. I determined not to visit with changes to the MoP in mind so much as to use this as an opportunity to learn about the committees' works and the people involved.

My participation at Sandy Spring meeting has been limited to two committees, the Committee on Aging, and Membership and Spiritual Care, and so far I've visited Advancement and Outreach, Graveyard and Grounds, and Religious Education, with plans to visit the Peace Committee next month. Slowly but surely I'll sit in on as many committee meetings as I can.

After all, I can still continue even after I'm no longer Assistant Clerk. One thing I've noticed already is the dedication and service of those involved. The Quaker committee process promotes community and provides the opportunity to get to know Friends in ways not possible any other way. What a gift our forebears set up for us!

Another stated duty of the Assistant Clerk is to select the queries for each month. Funny, although I read and pondered the queries, advices, and voices each month, I didn't pay much attention to where they came from until

Undercover Tyranny

Robb Lapp

I was asked to be Assistant Clerk. I assumed that some unknown committee at Yearly Meeting chose them, and I didn't even realize that they often vary from year to year. A couple in the past had caught my attention and I'd saved and posted them in my work area as an ongoing reminder of who I am and who I aspire to be.

Selection of the queries, advices, and voices for each month has become for me an incredible opportunity for spiritual growth. I start each month by spending time mining the on-line sources from the far-flung Quaker community for material related to the topic, and then sit with it over the next couple of weeks to see what speaks to me. Slowly the material is narrowed and honed and fine-tuned, as different pieces serve as foci for meditation and inward growth. Recently, I was reading a Pendle Hill pamphlet and was struck by words that spoke to my condition. I realized that I was beginning to find my own sources of voices. Perhaps they would not be shared, but they could if it was right, and they could certainly serve as the beginnings of a library of inspiration and contemplation of my own.

Putting together a submission about Sandy Spring Meeting for the Interchange has given me the opportunity to connect with committees in a different way and to come to an understanding of what they think is important. The work also gives me a more complete picture of what we have been up to as a community and a chance for reflection. It is a different perspective than just reading it in the newsletter or living through it. What a great way to get to know the work of the Meeting more intimately as preparation for taking on the role of Presiding Clerk!

As this first year winds down, I am comfortable with the decision made to be Assistant Clerk and not yet too apprehensive over the upcoming transition to Presiding Clerk. I anticipate my level of concern will rise as the time draws nearer, but am also certain in the calling, at least most of the time. In my opening I spoke of the challenges of this year, and I realize that I can't think of any beyond my own internal issues and the way I am learning to get out of my own way. I am oh-so-grateful for the opportunity to serve in this manner and for the gifts I have received. Praise be to God!

Mary Satterfield is Clerk of Sandy Spring Monthly Meeting in Sandy Spring, MD

*A child told another,
"If you won't play what I want to play,
I won't ever be your friend."*

*Again, that child told the other,
"You can't play with anyone else during recess.
You must play with me or I won't ever like you."*

*Next time, that child threatened,
"You have to be in my play.
I've written a part just for you.
If you won't come to my house today,
I'll hate you forever."*

*The victim intuitively felt,
"But I like to play with all the kids.
Joey and Brandon are my friends, too."*

*The abused one felt very sad
because she wanted to like the dictator.*

*But in her insecurity,
the insecurity of all nine year old girls,
she believed all power was in the perpetrator's hands.
She believed she had to comply
to receive love she didn't recognize as hollow.*

*At supper, the victim tearfully spilled her dilemma.
Dad said, "Your friend has a problem.
"She wants to control you, which isn't fair.
You are not making her act mean.
The way she's acting is her problem, not yours.
It says way more about her than about you."*

*Dad said more: "Try this.
"Why don't you tell her you feel bad
when she tries to run your life.
Tell her you'll be playing with all your friends,
and see what she does.
Tell her you're in charge of your life,
and see what she says."*

*Next day,
the little girl confronted the controller,
"I will play with all my friends during recess
and you can play, too."
"Okay," said the other.*

*When she came home, the little girl said,
"You gave me good advice.
I told her I want to be free
to play with all my friends.
And, she didn't get mad at me.
I don't feel sad anymore."*

Robb Lapp is a United Church of Christ (UCC) minister who never wrote a poem until he was 80. His ministry has been mostly civil rights, low income housing, and community institutional development, though he has served as organizing minister of two new UCC churches.

Ringing the Pigs

Mariellen Gilpin

No pigs in sight. The early morning sun turned the haze over the prairie bottomland a silvery blue. It was going to be a hot day. I banged the corncrib door again, but still the pigs didn't come for breakfast. I didn't have time for this—I needed to change into dress and heels for my office job. I studied the far end of the pasture, where the haze played tricks on my eyes; it looked like black soil instead of green pasture. I needed to walk closer to be sure.

Halfway down the path, I could see where the pigs had been rooting the soft soil of the bottomland. I knew they had lost the metal nose rings that discouraged turning over the soil, and had discovered delicious fresh roots and grubs were available for the rooting. To keep the whole pasture from being eroded, these pigs needed to be rung—that day if at all possible. It had to be done. I hated ringing pigs; the whole family did. I steeled myself, already not-feeling the evening of horror ahead.

Daddy was already in the garden when I finished my chores. He was picking green beans, sitting on an old kitchen chair and hitching it forward as he picked. The two rows of beans extended the length of the garden. Sitting on the chair meant his face brushed the rough bean leaves as he picked. I hated to think how the leaves must feel against his face, still tender from radiation. He had gained a little weight after the surgery and radiation, but now it was clear he was losing again. The cancer had spread. We all knew it, and none of us said anything.

Daddy was a gambler. The family taught me to orphan myself from him, even though we ate at the same table and I washed his workpants every Saturday. I hungered for a daddy so

much that God became Daddy in my young mind. But the family remembered Christmases my father didn't come home until he'd lost every penny he had at the poker table. He had no medical insurance. He had fed his addiction rather than taking care of his future, or mine: I had dropped out of college, losing both scholarship and work-study grant, because getting my office job, and caring for the livestock, would help pay his medical bills. I was silently, politely angry.

But I also noticed when my mother and I came dragging home from our jobs, dinner was ready. It might be pancakes and canned greens, and making dinner probably was the only time he'd been out of his chair that day, but I was grateful we could come home and sit down to dinner. He'd also spent time each day planning interesting things to talk about over supper; I came home to intelligent conversation after a day listening to office gossip. And here he was, picking beans. He'd planted the beans, too, and would help snap them, a couple dishpans full at a time. We would freeze them to eat next winter. Daddy was picking beans he wouldn't be around to help eat. "The pigs are rooting up the pasture," I told him. He stopped picking. Nobody could—or did—afford anesthesia for ringing pigs.

"What do you think we should do?" he asked. It was Daddy's way to instruct—asking questions, not giving orders. He respected me.

The pigs were half-grown and probably weighed 75 pounds apiece. There were forty pigs. I said, "Bob could do it, but I don't like the way Bob treats livestock." Bob neighbored with us, but he beat and kicked his livestock. There was a limit to what I was willing to steel myself to do. I hated to ask my brother Chris. Chris had a new law office and a wife and two babies, a third on the way. I tried to spare him when I could. But this was the 1950s, and ringing pigs was men's work. The pigs would pay Daddy's doctor, and Chris would help if I asked. "I can call Chris," I said to Daddy, "and ask him to come after work to hold the pigs. If I manage the gates into the ringing pen, do you think you could handle the ringing?"

Daddy nodded. "How will you get the pigs into the barn?" he asked.

I would use pig psychology, because herding pigs made them anxious and hard to manage. They knew something was up. But pigs would do anything for corn. "I'll wait until five o'clock, and then go bang the corncrib door and throw their corn inside the barn. I haven't put out corn this

Discovering God as Companion Now available as an E-Book

In 2007 the WCTS team published *Discovering God as Companion*, an anthology of the first ten years of publishing the meeting for worship in print, *What Canst Thou Say?* In the past five years, over 600 books have been sold. *Discovering God as Companion* is now available as an e-book for Kindles, Nooks, Ipad, and other such devices.

Discovering God as Companion: Real Life Stories from What Canst Thou Say? Mariellen Gilpin, Editor, 2007. Published by Authorhouse. Kindle Edition available from <amazon.com>, Book Nook Edition available from <barnesandnoble.com> Paperback available from FGC Bookstore <quakerbooks.org> (800) 966-4556

morning because they're busy rooting, but they'll probably be ready for corn by then. When they're all in the barn eating, I'll shut them in. We'll have to work fast, though, because it's going to be hot, and there's no water in the barn." We also worked fast so the pigs spent less time worrying—a worried pig didn't eat and didn't gain. We couldn't sell skinny pigs. Daddy nodded. I went to call Chris and dress for the office.

As I drove to work, I planned a story or two to tell. I was learning to control how much office drivel I had to smile through by bringing up something more interesting to talk about. Over lunch I would tell about my latest efforts to learn to bake bread. Cooking is neutral territory for a group of women, especially if you tell a story on yourself. They usually brightened as soon as I started a story; they sometimes talked about their mothers' and grandmothers' cooking. We'd begun bringing something we'd made to share. We shared recipes. I no longer had a daily diet of bickering. I was applying Daddy's secret: if you don't want to bicker, plan ahead.

After work I hurried into barn clothes. Mommy had supper underway. "What should I do to help?" she asked. Mommy had fainting spells; her heart was not good. She didn't need the heat and dust in the barn, and she wasn't needed anyway—the only woman's work available was managing the gates, and I could do both gates alone. But Mommy needed to help, too, so I said, "Brew lots of fresh iced tea now, so it can get good and cold while we work. We'll need a cold drink when we're done." She nodded, and I left for the hog barn.

When I banged the corncrib door, the pigs' ears pricked up in the bottomland. They trotted up the path while I threw the corn inside the barn. They didn't grunt companionably the

way they usually did; maybe they were keeping the rooted-up pasture a secret. Pigs were smart; I wondered if they were capable of plotting together. We didn't just raise our pigs, we liked and enjoyed them. But you had to be careful around pigs, too.

When the last pig was in the barn, I closed the rough wooden gate. Chris arrived a few minutes later, along with Daddy, who had the box of copper rings and the pliers-like gadget he would use to set the rings. The ringing pen was a short hallway between two walls of stout wooden fence, just big enough for two men and a pig. At one end of the ringing pen was a small gate opening outward into the pasture. At the other end was a high wooden gate, opening into where the pigs were now finishing the corn.

I hungered for a daddy so much that God became Daddy in my young mind. But the family remembered Christmases my father didn't come home until he'd lost every penny he had at the poker table.

Chris positioned himself inside the big inner gate. Daddy stood in the middle of the ringing pen and loaded his pliers with the first copper ring; when he closed the handles, the ring would pierce the pig's nostrils. Standing in an adjacent pen, protected from the pigs, I reached through the fence and unhooked the big gate. From now on, the men would focus entirely on the pigs.

Chris escorted a wary pig into the ringing pen and shut the gate; I fastened it. He straddled the pig and grabbed its forelegs. Quickly he pulled the pig's front quarters off the pavement and held the pig firmly with both hands, his knees pressed against the

pig's sides. Daddy squatted in front of the pig, seized its snout with one hand and clamped the pliers together in the pig's nostrils. The pig squealed. I broke out in a cold sweat in spite of the heat. I swallowed my empathy; there were 39 more pigs to ring.

I released the hook on the outer gate, Chris let go the pig, and Daddy stepped back so it could dash for freedom. Daddy reloaded his pliers. I hooked the outer gate and went to the inner gate. When Daddy was ready, I opened the gate. Chris separated another pig from the now-frightened herd and ushered it into the hallway. He pulled the gate shut and I latched it. Daddy rang the pig, then another, and another. A cloud of dust hung in the hallway and shone yellow in the rays of the setting sun. The dust settled on our sweat-covered bodies, forming a gray crust.

One pig grunted a warning, his neck bristles standing on end. Chris grabbed him and held him steady, Daddy rang him, and the pig squealed. Daddy told me not to open the gate—the pliers had misfired, and Daddy needed to put in another ring. Chris took fresh hold on the pig, and Daddy placed the ring correctly. The pig squealed again.

We continued to work. Finally the last pig was chased into the ringing pen. The pig lay down flat, grunting his fear-cry. "This pig has read about passive resistance," I thought, "He couldn't get any closer to the pavement than he is already." Chris straddled the pig and pulled up on his forelegs. The pig squealed loudly, even though the ring was nowhere near his nose yet. Chris was unable to lift him. Chris steeled himself, took fresh hold on the pig's front legs, and pulled upwards determinedly. Slowly the pig, squealing all the while, came into position for ringing.

Daddy had rung 39 pigs already. He breathed noisily, the air whistling in his head where the sinuses had been removed. He squatted in front of the pig, grabbed the pliers in both hands, and rang the pig. Every bit of strength he had left was in that last effort. I looked at his fleshless hands. "There's nothing there," I thought. "Nothing but bone and what's left of a lifetime of muscle." The pig squealed, Daddy stepped back, and I unlatched the gate to let the last pig escape.

The barn was silent now, empty of pigs. The sunlit dusty air showed me my father in a different way. He sat on the filthy pavement in the ringing pen. Probably he had shortened his already-limited time on earth, and certainly spent himself for the family. Together, we gasped great gulps of dusty air. Chris had held onto forty frightened, writhing, half-grown pigs while we traumatized them mercilessly. Chris caught his breath first. Hands on hips and head bowed, he drew enough breath to speak. He said, "I couldn't figure why that last pig was so heavy, or why he was squealing so much. When I finally got him up, I saw I'd been standing on his ears."

"Lordy, Chris," Daddy said, breathing heavily. "This is no time to be telling funny stories." Humor is where you need it. We gasped for air and laughed.

Iced tea was waiting for us—good and cold. Supper was in the oven, but we were too tired and hot to eat. We sat on the porch and gulped iced tea. We said nothing. "Ringing pigs is nasty business," Mommy said, "but it has to be done." I looked sidewise at Daddy.

"Dying is nasty business," I thought. "It's something else that has to be done. Daddy is still a young man—he ought to have twenty more good years. But he doesn't, and I don't have those years with him, either. I'll never know who he really was." What would it take to finish his dying—one

month? Three? I didn't know. But I didn't like the process. It was going to get worse, too. Death I could deal with. In death we were in the presence of God. Dying was a nasty business. I grieved—for the first time—the father I'd never known.

Mariellen Gilpin is a member of Urbana-Champaign meeting, Illinois, and an editor of WCTS. She says, "Dissociation is gift and millstone. It's necessary to function in horrific situations, and also an efficient way to store a lifetime of unprocessed pain in body, mind, and spirit. Both my brother and I grieve that we never knew our father."

Wherever You Go, There You Are

Rhonda Ashurst

When I was twenty-eight I ran away to Brazil. I'd thought about it since I was fourteen, an ongoing fantasy that floated along the edge of my consciousness, taking center stage when I felt the strongest urges to escape from my life. I pictured myself on the beach at Ipanema, half-naked and totally free. I can't tell you why it was Brazil. It just was.

I was in graduate school, studying to become a psychotherapist, when I discovered I wasn't who I thought I was. I'd made someone up to please everyone else. I became convinced that changing the outer circumstances of my life was the way to find myself. I left my husband. Then, I met HIM.

He was the manager of a Reggae band—an ex-con, black as midnight with hazel eyes and dreadlocks to his shoulders. He was everything I was not supposed to be with; of course I fell for him in a rush of heated madness.

I can't remember when Brazil came up. Oh, but when it did, it created in us both a relentless urgency. We had to go and we had to go NOW. Within a week I'd sold my car, arranged a leave

of absence from the university, emptied my apartment, given most of my possessions to the Salvation Army, told lies to my friends and family about my trip, and made travel arrangements. We intended to make a new life in Brazil.

I cashed in my retirement account, transforming the numbers on my monthly statement into a pile of cash. That night we spread it out on the bed and made love in it, \$100 bills sticking to our sweating skin. The next morning he told me he had to visit his family in Haiti before he joined me in Brazil. There was political unrest there and he was concerned for them. Could he take half the money to help them if they needed it? In my love-struck, euphoric state, I happily handed it over.

The next day I took him to the airport to catch a plane to Haiti. He turned to me as he was leaving and said, "This trip is for you, to thine own self be true." It was the last time I saw him.

When I figured out he wasn't coming to Rio, that he'd played me for the money, I was in a hotel room on Copacabana. I sat on the floor and cried for a day.

Then, some wiser part of me said, "Rhonda, you've been dreaming about this place for years; Rio is waiting. Don't waste it." I picked myself off the floor, put on a g-string bikini and headed for the beach.

I was quickly discovered by a Brazilian man with curly, black hair who sat on my towel, whipped out a bottle of oil and started massaging it into my back. I was so stunned, I was momentarily mute. Then, I politely asked him to please leave me alone. This had no effect whatsoever. I felt paralyzed by a familiar fear, the fear of denying someone else. When he tried to untie my bikini top, something in me snapped and I pushed him violently away, throwing handfuls of sand in his direction and screaming epithets. It was my first lesson in wherever you go, there you are.

I guess we all think we can get away from ourselves, that we can go some place else where all our problems will disappear like clouds after a thunderstorm. It is truly a shock to find they hitched a ride in your suitcase.

In the following weeks, I had multiple opportunities to stand up for myself: bartering in the marketplace, dealing with the aggressive advances of Brazilian men, wiring money from the office of a man who kept loaded pistols in a glass case behind him, getting off an Italian Navy ship in one piece after accepting the invitation of a friend to attend an on-board party. These challenges always frightened me, but I pushed myself to face them anyway. As the days went by my confidence grew.

Then another interesting phenomenon came to my attention. I discovered a Divine Presence watching over me. I rather suspect it has always been there, but I was too busy in my daily life to notice. Or, maybe in a more familiar environment, I was susceptible to the delusion that I had got everything under control. In this strange and wild place, I became keenly aware that whatever I needed seemed to miraculously appear when I asked: help changing money, someone to talk with who spoke English, a translator in the marketplace, a guide to show me the city and keep me out of trouble, friends to hang out with. It was uncanny how it worked.

One of these miracles was meeting Santana. I had gone to Salvador da Bahia in northeast Brazil, drawn by its reputation as the spiritual and artistic center of Brazilian culture. I'd found a small group of friends to hang around with and explore the city. I was considering staying there, afraid to go home and face the friends and family I'd left behind, and the lies I'd told them.

I met Santana in the marketplace. He attached himself to me, assisting with bartering and translating. I suspected his motives. After I finished shopping, he asked me to join him in a juice bar near the market. As we sat down at a table, he took my hand and said, "I feel compelled to tell you my story, but I don't know why." He told me of waiting for his lover in Rio a few weeks earlier, but she had never come. She had taken a large sum of his money, telling him she had to go home to Norway and help her family. She promised to meet him in Rio. By this time the hair was standing up on the back of my neck. I shared my own parallel story and we sat staring at each other, dumbfounded.

"What do you need?" he asked.

"I need a job so I can stay here," I answered.

He was a native of Salvador da Bahia and had many local connections. He agreed to help me find a job teaching English.

Shortly after this serendipitous meeting, I contracted a virus and spent the next few days in bed in my hotel. During that time, I did a lot of soul searching and it seemed suddenly clear. Santana's offer to help me stay shifted a tectonic plate deep inside me and I knew I had to go home. I needed to face the lies I'd told the people I loved. I needed to finish school and follow the path I'd chosen. I realized no life is perfect—no place is perfect.

On the flight home, it occurred to me that my lover had given me a beautiful gift—this chance to find my own strength, to be true to myself. I finally understood that there is no place of total freedom out there; true freedom was inside me all along, waiting for me to choose it.

Wave Your Freak Flag

Rhonda Ashurst

I was watching a movie the other night about a family get-together over the holidays. After the uptight, anxious girlfriend of the older brother commits a series of disastrous social blunders, the laid-back younger brother takes her out to the local bar and gives her some relationship advice. He says, "Here's the thing, you're always waving a freak flag." This makes quite the impression on her. As the story goes on, she tones down her freakiness and ends up married to the younger brother.

But, here's the thing, it was her freak flag waving that hooked him on her in the first place. He was drawn to her idiosyncrasies like a moth to light. She needed to tone it down several notches, and his candid comment helped her understand this. Yet, I laughed gleefully at the little moments when the old freak flag went flying again. It was her freak flag that endeared her to him, to the family, to the audience.

The film reminded me of a conversation I once had with a Rastafarian over a fruit smoothie in Brazil. He said, "Sista, when ya wanna know dat somebody wanna be wid you, be yaself." He told me that was the best way to screen out the people who didn't fit with me. It was an entirely new concept at the time. Funny, I can still remember the scene in that little juice bar like it was yesterday.

Before that I'd thought the best way to get people to like me was to try and figure out what they wanted and deliver it. You can get lost doing that, plus end up surrounded by others who wouldn't want to be around the real you, anymore than you really want to

be around them. I was trying to find myself in Brazil, and people like the Rasta Man kept showing up to help me. Looking back, I think he was an astute judge of character and had figured out that I was lost in people pleasing. I'm grateful he took the time to point it out.

Since then, I've tried out his theory and found it really works. I have made close friends who know me for who I truly am and love me anyway. Bless them. I'll never forget the day one of my old friends said, "You know, it's really good to see you come out from behind that white picket fence you've been hiding behind. You're a lot more fun these days."

As I've grown older, I've decided that it is our flaws that can be so endearing, that teach us to love each other in spite of ourselves. Let's face it—we are just a whole lot more interesting with all our funky little quirks. When we try to distill ourselves down to a non-offensive, politically correct version, we can become about as interesting as an unsalted soda cracker.

In my work with people, relationship issues are often a main focus. Frequently, the question I am asked goes something like this: "How do I attract the right mate, friends, business partners?" I like to respond by asking them, "Who are you and how are you revealing your true self to others?"

Many times I am met by a blank stare and I remember my own reaction in that juice bar in Brazil all those years ago. New concept. So, what about spending less energy on image management and more energy on self-discovery? Then let that freak flag fly and see what happens...

Rhonda Ashurst is a life coach and writer living in Reno, Nevada. She believes we are all broken off pieces of God—experimenting with physical existence and bringing what we learn Home.

Second Annual Gathering of Friendly Mystics Naming the Spiritual Condition of the World

We are already planning the second annual gathering of mystics, which will be held at Earlham College next year. As out of worship during the first gathering there was a leading that this group of mystics was called to name the spiritual condition of the world, we intend to add a couple of days to the second gathering which will be composed of extended worship to receive God's continuing guidance.

The gathering of friendly mystics in 2014 will be composed of two parts. The first portion, between Friday night and Sunday noon, will be much like the first gathering. The emphasis will be on supporting each other. We hope that all types of Quakers will come. Small groups and interest group formats will be provided, and our time together will be grounded in worship.

The second half of the gathering will begin on Sunday. We will begin working together to listen for the will of God regarding naming the spiritual

condition of the world. It is anticipated that this work will require significant effort. We plan to look deeply into ourselves and the world around us. Worshiping alone and together, earnest prayers and soul-searching will be called upon.

If answers—or simply questions—arise, everyone will be tasked with listening to each other soul-to-soul. Putting aside all our differences, the essence of our best selves can join in seeking clarity.

As one of the organizers put it, "We're going to gather a people to sit at the feet of the Lord." What a beautiful image. We look forward to sitting in a circle with the Lord in our midst, illuminating our foibles, beauty, and the tasks before us.

For more information, contact Michael Resman <resmanmh@aol.com> 507-281-5838, 815 9th Street SW, Rochester MN 55902.

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February 2014

Spirit-Led Writing

Editor: **Judy Lumb**

“Thus saith the Lord ...” What is your experience with spirit-led writing? Have you felt the hand of God in your writing? Have you ever received what you thought was channeled material? How did you feel while it was happening? How did you discern whether it was ego or truth? Did you keep it to yourself, or share it with others? How did you feel about sharing it? In what setting did you share it, and what was the response? What do you think now?

Deadline: November 15, 2013

May 2014

Holding On and Letting Go

Editor: **Michael Resman**

Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Matthew 19: 24). When do you hang on and when do you let go of anger, resentment, fear, possessions, past hurts, ideas, relationships, addictions, habits, distractions? What has helped you keep making healthier choices? What has made it more difficult? Share your stories of hanging on and letting go.

Deadline: February 15, 2014

August 2014

Sacred Places

Guest Editor: **Kathy Tapp with Judy Lumb**

Sacred places each have their own story, presence and energy; yet what they really do is help us access the sacred place within ourselves. They lead us to our connection with God/Spirit/ Light. Tell us about that place of comfort, inspiration, healing, whether it be in Assisi or your own backyard, that place where you have gone ‘on pilgrimage’. Why did you go? What was it like? Were you alone, or with others? Has a revelation come to you in your sacred place?

Deadline: May 15, 2014

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***Trials and
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