

A Report by Kathryn Gordon

A Mystical Weekend

Friday

Six hours of Interstate, Parkway, Turnpike, then again Interstate before I turn off onto a tree-lined street for Pendle Hill. I quiet the engine and get out. I have been here before, an April daffodil day. Good Friday and Passover. Now fallen leaves give their "little noiseless noise" and mulch-scent to the air. Surrounding this peace is the roar of the Blue Route--eight lanes of superhighway whose construction Pendle Hill and neighboring Swarthmore College tried to stop for years. Stillness is reached now despite it and within it--a metaphor, I think, for contemporary Quakerism's challenge in a rush-hour world.

The oaks I walk beneath must be as old as the society itself. I am struck by the clarity I feel. The confusions and evasions of the last six months come into focus: my choices have moved me in the wrong direction. With this clarity comes a confident, unrecriminating urgency: I have work to do and will do it.

Approaching Brinton House, I notice a man standing alone on the walkway. He glides forward, opens the door, then disappears. I find registration, feeling anxious and exhausted. Have I missed dinner? Can people tell just by looking at me that a few hours before I was stuck behind a Garden State Parkway toll booth screaming with frustration? Do I deserve to be here?

Off to the side of the registration table stands the same man, hands folded before him, eyes forward, like an usher at a theater. Odd, I reflect, as I receive my room assignment. Odd how calm I feel now.

After dinner we assemble in the Barn Meeting Room--more women than men, more grey hair than not, fifty-one participants from fourteen states, five leaders: Marty Grundy, Marcelle Martin, Pat McBee, Mike Resman, Bill Taber--four convinced, one birthright, respectively. Hung above the facing benches is a quotation from Galatians: "The fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, against which there is no law" (5:22-23 RSV).

Pat McBee, conference co-leader and clerk of Central Philadelphia meeting, provides an overview, emphasizing guidelines that recognize "the varied ways in which we have experienced the Spirit and of the tenderness with which many of us hold these experiences." One way Pat herself has experienced the Spirit, she reveals, is through quaking. But she has never allowed herself to quake during Quaker meeting. When she raised the issue with the leadership team, they suggested she "Let the Spirit move her even if it meant literally moving." It did, and she would, a visible and entirely estimable testimony.

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Each leader will speak to us of his or her journey, starting tonight with Marty Grundy and Marcelle Martin. With humble dignity Marty Grundy speaks not of sudden transformations, but of growing acceptance that in her day to day life she was a mystic. She might for example be writing in her journal and discover that by the end the words were coming not from her, but through her. For a time she could discern when Spirit was speaking through someone at meeting and when it had moved on. This ability left her one day, only to resurface in another member. She distills a theme that will emerge strongly in the conference--gifts come to individuals for the good of the group.

Then it is Marcelle Martin's turn. I recall a night fourteen years before when she was seated in my audience as I am now seated in hers. We were in the same graduate writing program and I was reading from my novel-in-progress, which though I didn't consciously know it at the time was about the childhood incest I'd repressed. Her presence guided me then, as it would throughout my struggle to regain wholeness. I am grateful and moved to be here. She stands and after a silence begins.

In 1985, she was walking out one night under the stars. It was during a period of questioning about the nature and meaning of life. Though she was half way through the four year program, she knew she would not find the answers there. She was feeling sorry for herself. She looked up at the stars and thought--they're so far away, I can have no connection with them (as a child she had supposed that she could). Then suddenly she experienced the reality that she and the stars and all the cosmos were one, indivisibly united in a single whole. With this realization energy began streaming through her--up her feet, legs, into her heart, through her arms and out her fingers into the world.

She knew that this power was divine and could easily heal the world and all its problems. She knew her role was to be a channel for that healing power. There followed a period of fierce seeking. She sometimes wondered if she was crazy (an experience shared by others at the conference). There were many psychic openings. While teaching one day she was filled with a golden light. Emanating that light, she understood this to be her real teaching. It was hard after that, she joked, to talk to her English Composition students about paragraph structure.

Often as she spoke she brought her hands together and touched her fingertips to the center of her chest. Making a point, she would cast the hands toward us, as if spreading seed from a supply stored there in the heart.

If I say I was moved how can I say how much I was moved? I had been both a beneficiary of the light coming through this generous steadfastly opening heart and a witness to the continuing travail such opening demanded. Here was a flowering of that now eleven year old vision.

Saturday Morning

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The silent usher who silently greeted me turns out to be co-leader Mike Resman. He introduces the day's topic--"How Mystical Experience Informs and Transforms Our Lives." He tells of his first mystical opening, which I read about the day I was here last April ("The Teacher Within", April Friends Journal). At meeting, while praying for his spiritual mentor, who had been badly hurt in a car accident, he was shown heaven. He knew himself to be in God's presence, whose love he experienced as "greater than the love of all mothers over all time."

Mike Resman's story is the one with which I will identify most because it starts with damage and anger passed on to him by his mother. Recently I have befriended three men who were severely abused by their mothers. I am learning that the damage done to girls by fathers is not more tragic than the damage done to boys by mothers, nor is the resulting anguish greater. Although I had hoped to be in Marcelle's group, it seems right to me when I learn I've been assigned to Mike's.

After meeting for worship, we break into our small groups. Mistakenly, I take a chair that's already been taken. An elderly man enters, looks at the chair and at me. There is a scuffle of sorts as he insists I keep the chair and I insist he take it back. I move to the sofa directly to his right.

The room is large and comfortable--two couches facing, a few upholstered chairs, pleasant light. Above the mantle is a painting I've seen in the library of my meeting house: old time Quakers gathered, all heads bowed but one--a young woman looking up at the translucent Jesus figure who hovers above the elders' bench, arms open in blessing. Does she see Him, or is it faith that lights her face?

After a silence, the elderly man begins. With growing emotion he speaks of letters from his estranged daughter--fantasies, accusations. I know she is accusing him of incest. I love him completely. The past, his or mine, seems irrelevant. Healing is happening and I believe my concentration can help it along. Maybe that makes me a mystic. Maybe that makes me alive.

The worshipful openness of this first sharing sets the tone. From the silence come accounts of both sudden and gradual transformations: careers and marriages changed mid-course; healing gifts discovered and nurtured; new and strange fields of study opened; childhood trauma healed; visions: of Jesus, of a large blue-robed woman experienced as Christ; knowings: an either instantaneous or evolved certainty that a particular course is divinely guided. These Friends speak with an authenticity and care I have come to identify with Quakerism. These are not people whose veracity or motives one tends to doubt.

I think I am moved to speak, beginning with a joke--I still don't know if this feeling in my stomach is a leading or fear. But after all, I've only been attending a year. We laugh, but now I have to step toward the layer of feeling I've been avoiding for six months. I think to say that when meditating I often hear the word "representative" and wonder what I might be a representative of. Then a wave of grief rises and I say, "I suppose I represent the dead." I don't know what I mean by that, but then I think of my mother, dead a year, and her sisters, alive and addicted, and my sister, and my cousins, and the next generation--all, I fear, dead to the Light. I

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want to speak on their behalf before this select group--many of them healers. I feel I am the head of a body just emerging from a black bog. Because of the light in which I am held, I can open my heart to the buried parts and yet still look up toward the sun. That must be why the tears on my face are so hot.

Rhythmic entrainment--A term used by physicists to describe a common phenomenon. It's explained by inventor-physicist Itzhak Bentov in his amazing little book, *Stalking the Wild Pendulum* (Destiny Books 1988). Oscillating fields of energy tend naturally and easily to fall into one rhythm: fireflies landed on the same bush begin to blink together; the pendulums of grandfather clocks hanging on the same wall begin to swing in sync; oscillating electronic circuits in a television fall into the same frequency, with the slower increasing to match the faster. "When a strong harmonizing rhythm is applied to [the] matrix of interlocking fields," he writes, "its harmonic influence may entrain parts of the system that may have been vibrating off key" (36).

Is this is a metaphor or a literal description of what happened at the conference? I don't know, but I do know two things: I was in the presence of "a strong harmonizing rhythm", and much of the world is indeed "vibrating off key."

Evening.

Bill Taber speaks of "Grounding our Experience in the Quaker Tradition." I recall by contrast some of my early mystical experiences. Ungrounded in a faith community, I suffered from self-delusion and ego-inflation, which polluted subsequent experience. To adapt a metaphor Bill Taber used--I thought I was the light and not the lantern, so nothing shone. Now I sit among lanterns who seem to feel neither grandiose nor worthless (sides of the same coin); who are steady, solid, and--when united as now--breathtakingly bright.

Throughout his talk people nod and smile. He speaks of radiators, members who silently channel the uplifting Light into the meeting. He tells of being recorded a minister by his meeting and how soon after they requested to release him. He was, he said, troubled by that, not wanting to appear to be a hired minister. But after prayer he realized his meeting ought to have the opportunity to recognize that God was working through him. He speaks of many things which at this writing I can't clearly recall. I know I wished I'd brought a notebook. I know in meditation after I heard: "Now you are a Quaker in your heart." I know I was glad.

At a meal, I overhear Bill Taber telling a woman how he grounds himself. He says sometimes he simply rings a small bell, and listens. I picture a bare, sunny desk, a plain bell with a wooden handle motionless in the center of the sound it has sent out. Bill Taber's talk seems to me such a bell, its clear pitch offering Friends a centered grounding force.

Late evening.

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I find the elderly man. We sit in the dark diningroom drinking tea. I ask him about his daughter's accusing letters. She is accusing him, he says, of sexual abuse. I admit I thought so, not because he seems an abuser--far from it--but because of the anguish with which he spoke. Slowly and carefully, he says that while there was one "totally inappropriate" event, her accusations are false. He trusts that she is getting the professional help she needs. He wants only to help her in any way he can.

He tells me how he shared his hurt with a man he'd selected as a spiritual guide, meeting regularly with him, working through the many feelings that arose. He asks what I know about false memory syndrome. I admit I have suspected it is society's defense against a distressing truth. I tell how I resisted my own retrieved memories, the first and clearest of which came during meditation in a sudden, seemingly guided re-enactment. I try to explain how the body embeds memories as pain and tension.

Through these two difficult tellings we each listen to the God in the other. He doesn't challenge my version of my life and I don't challenge his. I am beginning to better grasp that word "tender". What two people or factions, which dispute, cannot with such tenderness eventually reconcile?

The worst thing, I tell him, is that my father died young, long before our relationship could begin to heal from the hurt, anger and guilt. I don't remember a single relaxed, affectionate moment between us.

Forgiveness, he says, is most freeing for the forgiver. "I know, I know," I say, a defense, for though I may have read and heard it I have not really believed it. Or done it. I open a little more, but the child in me who survived by closing down is tenacious.

Later he asks if I have written about my experience. I consider a long poem, "The Memory of the Body", about this closing down. An excerpt seems enough:

Daddy in the doorway
swaying like a sailor in a swell.
The heart's valves clench.
I crouch in a hollow auricle clutching a rock
as on the sheet of every cell my mirrored self
crouches clutching a rock.

The memory of the body is not false.
The memory of the body
is the lost black box
intact in the wreckage.

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It is all recorded,
the rip of the wing,
the pilot's quick prayer--

Let me live. I was four.

We've talked long. He goes upstairs to bed. I get a bowl of the popcorn someone has made and sit in the livingroom, other conversations going on all around.

Sunday

I dream Marcelle invites me to get into a boat with her. A canoe. In the morning I can't remember much more of the dream than that, and her bright face. At breakfast, from the table behind me I hear at least four times the emphasized phrase, "Get in the boat. Just get in the boat!" An important point in the conversation, it is repeated with emphasis and laughter: "And so I realized, just get in the boat and go."

I meet a woman from Wisconsin who is writing a Ph.D. dissertation on forgiveness, specifically "The role of transpersonal experience and social support in the forgiveness process."

Really? I ask later if "transpersonal experience" might be synonymous with mysticism, defined in Webster's as, among other things, "A belief in the existence of realities beyond intellectual or perceptual apprehension that are central to being and directly accessible by subjective experience, as by intuition." Exactly, she says.

My view of what's really real expands to include such graceful synchronicities.

The end of our last small group meeting.

When we stand to join hands, Mike Resman and I must hoist the elderly man out of his deep chair. Moved to tears, he thanks Mike for his radiating presence.

As the circle separates, I reach up to hug him. He says, "You know, last night you became as a daughter to me."

I nod yes but am too moved to speak. I have been given the reconciliation I thought I could never have.

What a brave man.

I feel joy, as well as grief--for the broken relationship, the lost love, my years of pathological anger, perhaps understandable, no less hurtful. I sit in the empty playground. The word "daddy", spoken aloud, is a switch releasing dammed emotions. This is more than I have ever felt at once,

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and exactly what I need to feel. Though I would rather have been having visions and bliss, here is the work I came this weekend to do, the light at the end of the tunnel, and an answer to prayers, and mystical.

In the Barn waiting for our last meeting to begin, I consider the Galatians quote, cupping each noun like a sip of water in my palm. Love. Joy. Peace. Patience. Kindness. Goodness. Faithfulness. Gentleness. Self-control. Against which there is no law. Glancing around at the gathering faces, remembering the stories that have been told and how they have been told, knowing better now the truth of each person in my group, I see everywhere these qualities embodied. Thinking of the painting and the three centuries of labor; looking at these faces after three days of mysticism, I am filled with gratitude and hope.

Elaine Waddle, who in two weeks will co-lead a similar conference on the west coast, sits on the back elder's bench noticeably quaking, as she has been on and off all weekend. Waves of trembling pass through my upper body. Father-related emotion continues. I wonder if my energy is disruptive. It seems to me I am feeling rather than worshipping or waiting in expectancy. The flow jams in my throat and I must leave, coughing. I quickly come back.

Later I meet a woman who left during meeting because she heard "Take your boots and go." Maybe I should have gone too. But I wanted to feel that current and hear those messages. One man asks us to consider addicts' addictions as attempts to ground themselves in their bodies. From another man comes an outpouring of prayer for more female images of the divine. A woman from my group who will later reveal that she "just does not sing", rises to sing "These are holy hands. These hands do God's work, and so these hands are holy hands." With verses for lips, eyes and so on. It's an uplifting and effective affirmation. A woman speaks of a vision of Jesus she had the night before, and I am reminded of the thoughtful discussions I have heard here between Christ-centered and universalist Quakers, and of the need for such thoughtfulness elsewhere.

I can see the face and square shoulders of the elderly man. The rising current is unblocking my heart. My trembling increases. I ride and at the same time resist the flow. What would it feel like to give up entirely?

The Pendle Hill lunch bell ends our worship, which has stretched twenty minutes over the expected hour.

Much later, in the New Year, I call the elder I met in my small group. We talk about the weekend and my difficulties writing this. He helps me see that my problem rests in deciding whether to report or to testify. Immediately this clarifies things. He also supplies what I know will become the article's last words: "This was a weekend about mysticism among Quakers, and we didn't just talk about it, we found it."

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