



Winter 2012 ISSUE

Editor's Note: I am grateful to all of those who wrote for this issue of The Quaker Heron. The topic was to write about challenges we have faced and any spiritual lessons received from these. I feel enriched for having read these articles, and I offer them as a gift to all of you who read them. - Ramona

A Personal Challenge by Gwen Jensen

How many of you have heard of the Waxter Detention Center? Most likely, none of you. It is the only juvenile female detention center in the Baltimore area. It holds girls from ages 13 to 18. Though not true for all of the girls there, the majority of them are merely held there while awaiting their trial. Very few crimes are major. Most are girls who have run away from foster homes, abusive situations, etc. And, they are held in over-crowded, understaffed, horrible living conditions. The boys, on the other hand, have committed far more severe crimes and yet get outdoor time, community service options, and many other privileges that the girls can only dream of. I am a girl scout. One of the awards I could earn is my Silver Award. I would like to do something to help these girls but keep putting it off. I'll say I'll start researching a little more, then, not unlike the girls, I will fall by the wayside. My challenge is not achieving my goal. But just getting started. I must continue to remind myself that a journey of two thousand miles begins with a single step.

(The Waxter Center is located in Laurel and serves Anne Arundel, Baltimore, Howard, and

Prince George's counties and Baltimore City.)

Dealing with a Bully by Astrid Jensen

A few months ago (probably in November) someone was bullying me by copying everything I said and it wouldn't stop. I didn't want to tell my teacher or parents because I knew they had a lot of work to do. One day when the harassing got very bad – and worse than before, I told my Mom. My Mom sent an email to my teacher and my situation was fixed. Now I know the right thing to do when you can't fix something by yourself.

Challenges and Spiritual Lessons by Michelle Dunn

Several of my largest challenges and important spiritual lessons have occurred as a result of my work. I feel that I am perpetually struggling to find a healthy balance in life between finding fulfilling work and personal time. I would like to share three experiences that have occurred as a result of my search - superiority, integrity, and the real meaning of success.

I have learned the most from what has been some difficult years, professionally. Years ago, I began a job that changed the course of my life, for the better. After that change was set in motion, a person was hired to help support the project on which I worked. Immediately, it seemed to me that this new co-worker wanted to run the program. The ship I was sailing in seemed to suddenly blow off course. Each day was a test of my spiritual strength. How could

this happen? Doesn't anyone else see what is taking place? I was sure that the administrative team knew who had seniority on this project. One of my secret coping strategies was for me to feel superior, silently assured that the co-worker would not get promoted if there was an opportunity. The day she was promoted, I felt that my craft had capsized and I was going to drown. It took several months for me to work through my painful feelings and sort things out spiritually. I realized that I was not superior; I never was and never will be. Nothing is guaranteed to me and I should not expect things to be otherwise. The whole experience was incredibly humbling. The focus that got me through this experience was that we are all equal, and while this was initially difficult to see, I relied a lot on faith.

The work world continues to be a struggle, economically and morally. So much that I see and hear is not what I wanted or hoped for, but I continue to try and be at peace because at least I have a job. A friend at Meeting for Worship one First Day spoke about a book she felt called to share, *Lighting Candles in the Dark, Stories of Courage and Love in Action*. It has been an inspiring book, but one story has a special place in this message.

It was a story about John Woolman and I confess that before reading it, I did not know who he was. At one of his earliest jobs, John, who was a Quaker, was asked to write a bill of sale for another Quaker's black slave. Even though he knew how to write this type of document, he felt that this was different because he had black friends. To him this business exchange was as if the slave were like a horse, cat, or sack of flour. He struggled with what to do and then eventually wrote out the bill, but knew in the future he would refuse such tasks. At first he was scared that he would lose his job, but taking his courage from God, he would gently say that it was against his conscience to take part in the selling of a fellow human being.

Throughout his life, John continued to denounce slavery. This caused me to question how well do I denounce prejudices in my

professional environment? How far out on a limb am I willing to stand in regards to matters of principle or character? This is a real test to living one's faith.

Shortly after reading about John Woolman, I listened to a radio broadcast that I felt held the key to what I have been missing. The Christian Science Sentinel - Radio Show features people giving inspirational messages about living life according to *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* by Mary Baker Eddy.

On January 8, 2012, Stu Neale, spoke of starting several businesses, and then due to reasons out of his control, his businesses "failed" if we measure failure in material terms -- money, people, product. His message was that when you measure success in material terms "you are always in danger of failure because any of those can stop. You need to look at business in the sense of a career and in the sense of life."

He viewed his previous businesses as a success because "you are expressing ideas to each person you deal with every single day. Each time you write a letter, talk on the phone, or fill an order, you are not just doing something physical, but you are actually expressing the intelligence, goodness, and productivity that come from an Infinite Source, God.

What qualities are you expressing? What qualities does your product and the customers express? As you find better ways of supporting those qualities your business will be better and nobody can ever take that away from you. I do not care how much you give away to other people, how much love you give, it never runs out. If somebody is honest, it encourages everyone around them to be honest and if somebody is hard working everyone around them tends to be more hard working. It naturally has an effect on everybody that person is dealing with. And each time they respond, you just started an explosion of goodness and that is the most important thing.

Those qualities define the future for me. That's what keeps me waking up each morning

thinking, this is a good day." I now have some real keys to finding happiness and peace within my workplace. I am grateful for the willingness of others to share their messages and experiences. These spiritual lessons have given me hope that I can reach my goal.

Falling Forward by Bethanne Kashkett

It's amazing what a difference four steps and ten seconds can make. When my old slippers hit those hardwood steps I slipped and fell. Protecting my kitty Lois, in my arms the whole way, I never got my hands down to break the fall. Instead I hit each wood step and landed flat on my back on the cold cement floor. Lois was perfectly fine- I was not. I knew this was no ordinary fall. By the time Kenny helped me back in the house I could barely walk and almost passed out from the intensity of the pain. Later, the MRI showed a sacral fracture and dislocated tailbone. Months of recovery loomed ahead and even then we wouldn't know if surgery would be needed.

Once before, I dealt with uncertainty and physical restrictions. That time I was pregnant with Zach and complications forced me on bed rest for five months. I remembered how small your world can get when you rarely leave the house. First order of business...pain management! I was offered all the usual pharmaceutical solutions but opted for herbs, anti-inflammatory meds and heat. I found positions, like lying on my side that were more comfortable. It would be months before I could lie flat on my back.

On to managing my sanity! I chose books. Normally I'm a non-fiction lover- but these circumstances called for fiction. Books offered me the opportunity to escape into someone else's life. I went through stacks of them. I trained my family and friends not to ask me "Wow are you?" or "What's new?"....What could be new when I hadn't left the house in weeks? And healing was too slow to be measured in days or weeks, They learned to ask, "What have you been reading lately?" I also made a list of documentaries and watched them all. Now I had books and films to talk

about. Even if I wasn't moving much, I felt like my world and brain were expanding.

Next, I worked with my meditation practice. I couldn't sit to meditate, but I could certainly meditate while lying down. In yoga they call it the "corpse" pose! Not an inspiring term- but a practical position for me. I read books on healing meditation and practiced these new techniques including practices for living with chronic pain. As I healed, I could stand up longer and fold a basket of laundry or cut up veggies. I set small goals that I could accomplish, like preparing one new raw vegan dish- then back to my "perch".

I learned to knit lying down, to journal or write lying down (with flair pens or markers to bypass the whole ink/gravity issue). I got dressed every day, even though I had no place to go...and I did what I could by myself. In time, I added a short walk. That got me outside in the woods where I could see and experience the expansive sky.

Occasionally I would research the injuries I sustained. There is an excellent site on the Internet that archived stories from folks who had similar injuries. Bit by bit, I adjusted to the idea that spine surgery was a real possibility. I made the conscious decision to read only the stories with positive outcomes. I expressly avoided any story with complications or poor results from surgery.

February 2, 2011, two and a half years after the fall and after many trials and tribulations associated with finding an experienced surgeon, we were off to Richmond, Virginia. I traveled in the back of Kenny's car. Kenny created a comfy nest of blankets on a magnetic mattress. I liked to call it my "magic mattress"...not the safest way to travel, but it worked! Some nights I worried- would the surgery go well, would it make a difference, would there be nerve or ligament damage, Kenny was steady and calm, "We'll take it one step at a time" he'd say. We'd deal with just today, just this problem, just one issue at a time.

The recovery from surgery was much like the original injury. No sitting for the first

six weeks, no standing in one place. But the most difficult challenge was attempting to live with the uncertainty...not knowing whether the surgery was successful or how much “return” I’d get.

Living with a sacral/tailbone injury is really an invisible disability. You look fine from the outside, but your whole life is truly impacted. You can’t go to a movie, fly on a plane, serve on jury duty, or eat at a restaurant. Any task that entailed sitting longer than 30-40 minutes was off my menu. Over the last three and a half years I’ve stood through Quaker Meetings, school plays and award ceremonies, hospital visits, baseball games and college graduations etc.

After the surgery, I pulled out my recovery tools again: meditation, reading, walking, and knitting. One year later, I can finally say the surgery has helped. I can sit for up to two hours without pain. I hope to gain more “sitting time” during the next six months. I’ve accepted that I may always be “that girl with the cushion and pillows.” I’ve also done months of physical therapy and acupuncture which has helped enormously.

Healing, like life, reminds you that the only thing you get to control is your own state of mind.

Here are a few of my favorite healing tips:

- a. surround yourself with supportive, positive people who love you
- b. practice mindfulness
- c. remember that all things change- including this bad mood, this constant pain, this invasive test
- d. repeat a mantra- my favorite for doctor appointments and procedures:
“Sure as I am walking in, I will be walking out and this _____ will be over!”
- e. plan treats for getting through tough spots (I chose Chinese food for surviving doctor appointments and procedures I dreaded)

They say “what doesn’t kill you— makes you stronger.” I would never say that I

wouldn’t take back that trip down the steps- or that I learned so much from it that I would do it all again...I wouldn’t- ever! But, I would say that I gained something from the experience. If nothing else, some other time I’ll remind myself, “I can get through this, because I got through that!”

If you are lucky you gain new spiritual understandings. You expand your capacity for self-forgiveness, patience, faith, gratitude and compassion. You thank Spirit for the kind souls who travel the rocky path with you. Those beings of Light who raise you up, who love you even when you are super-cranky and celebrate when you heal - They remind you that no matter what, you are blessed.

Downsizing by David E Johnson

“Lay not up treasure on earth . . .”

I find downsizing to be a challenge. In 2006 we moved from a four bedroom house to a two-bedroom apartment; from a house with a full attic and full basement to an apartment with one 4x4x6 storage bin in the basement; from a yard with a 8’ by 12’ shed, to no yard or shed at all. It was obvious that something had to give. As an academic, I was particularly proud of the books I had accumulated during a 37-year teaching career. Being a handy man I had also collected a lot of tools, which primarily filled the garden shed. Our son, Bengt, and I had built a sailboat, a tree house, and had overhauled the engines of two automobiles.

A given in this challenge was that I had to let go of some things. I began with the books in my office at work. I separated those books that would be easy to part with, like examination copies of textbooks. Then I invited junior colleagues and select students to take their pick of the books I was willing to let go.

During the time we were preparing to move to Vantage House, we had a “flood” in the basement. The insurance company allowed cash payment for damaged books—all I had to do was pile up the books and take a photo. This generated a hunt for damaged

books and removed several hundred more from my collection. The library at Lynada's alma mater had suffered a mold bloom. I sent the librarian lists of primary works in philosophy. She convened a faculty committee and they selected which books they wanted. I boxed and shipped those titles. But more books remained than Lynada would let into the apartment.

The pressures of downsizing also applied to files of materials for classes and for research. Fortunately, a ruthless friend, Ann, stood by my side as I pulled file folder after file folder found with the books and files. This challenge applied to all categories of possessions.

Down-sizing was really a metaphor for choosing what was of value in my life. The end result is that we still have too many books for our apartment. In other words, down-sizing is an ongoing process, not a once-and-for-all activity. Now the really hard choices remain in culling out some more books.

How have I coped with meeting this challenge? One factor that helped me was the basic necessity of doing something. It was not an option to say, "Let's take it all to the apartment." Another factor was the tight parameters laid down by Lynada, my wife. In my heart of hearts I knew that she had my best interests in mind. But, that still did not reduce the pain of letting go of treasured possessions. I enjoyed being able to take a book off the shelf rather than going to the library. The faith in which I was raised put great store in verses like, "Lay not up treasure on earth where moth and rust corrupt and thieves break in and steal, but lay up treasure in heaven. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." In other words there are definite advantages to not laying in a lot of stuff.

However, one is never really finished with the process. There is a continual need to downsize because of acquiring more stuff. This ties the spiritual benefits of downsizing to the movement for simplicity. "Voluntary

simplicity" suggests that we divest ourselves of stuff, not because we have to but because we want to. I was forced into down-sizing by the pressure of the moment, but having done that, I can see the advantages.

Another benefit of downsizing, which at the moment I can only dream of, is that having less stuff means that you are able to focus on what you do have without being lost in a sea of clutter.

Finally, there is a lightness of spirit that comes from not having to deal with so much stuff. I don't know what I can compare that feeling to. But I have felt it a little bit when just my desktop has been cleared off and I can deal with one issue at a time in that clear space. It really is easier to concentrate on the task at hand without clutter surrounding the project.

So, downsizing is a constant challenge for me. I suspect it will be till the end of my days. Facing this challenge is gradually making me alter some behaviors. I have to learn the lesson of "letting go" of material things while maintaining a psychological equilibrium.

Difficult Challenges by John Buck

I encounter at least three types of challenges:

- *In-the-background festering conditions* ranging from the way I sometimes felt distant from my parents to the scratching and scratching of the cat on the other side of the room because he has allergies and we can't find the source of them
- *Self Generated Crises* caused by some action of mine that I didn't think through, such as marrying my first wife because it was April Fool's Day and isn't it funny to get married on that day? We divorced after nine years.
- *Crises that just happen to happen* like when Boeing laid me off from my first job along with about 100,000 other people and they shuttered our office building; or suddenly getting an allergy to wheat after about 60 years of not having

such an allergy – *possibly* because Monsanto decided to develop and sell a radically new strain of Durham wheat.

The thread that all of these challenges have in common is that they don't lend themselves to immediate fixes. They can seem quite insolvable, and dealing with them can drag on for months or years. I feel like I try to do something about them, but that nothing really works.

To the extent that I've ever been able to solve such situations, the only solution, in retrospect, was to take time to step back and face the "non sequitur," the fact that something is happening that shouldn't be happening despite good intentions may mean that there are larger factors, forces, or assumptions that are working themselves out. Without "step back" and clarity, I'm just a bobbing cork on the surface of an unseen roiling clash of forces and events. A danger in dealing with "larger force" situations is that "Taking one step after another and the way will open," can be a formula for just banging your head against the wall. Letting the way open can be a good strategy; it can also be a very bad one - for me at least. If I think that way, I become fatalistic. Stop and say there is a problem with high priority, step back to get out of the swirl of day-to-day activities, focus, think – perhaps ask for some help – then act with courage.

Knowing my Power by Susan Hills Rose

Over ten years ago, I accepted the challenge of a six-month consultancy as a communications specialist. I was to go to Uganda as a consultant to their Ministry of Finance and Planning and help them understand the needs of stakeholders in the budget process – businesses, government entities at several levels, individuals. It was just too amazing an opportunity to say no.

One thing I had going for me was my ignorance of the entire country, its culture, its people, and how it works. I say going for me because what I didn't know was that two previous "experts" had been, essentially, fired

for hubris. I knew I didn't know. I knew the challenge was huge. I knew I had to be taught. And so I dove in with a huge effort to listen to everyone who would talk to me. I ended up talking with almost 200 people in groups and individually. I also hired a Ugandan to do focus groups with local people. I listened all the harder for having to learn so much. The listening I had done gave me credibility. Some of the changes I recommended actually happened, and I am told they made a difference.

When I went back to evaluate progress, a local activist held up a little pamphlet in his local language, written at my recommendation, and told me, "this book is like water to me." And the listening also gave me a passion, a "fire in the belly" about what was needed. I felt clarity come to me as I tested ideas with the people they were intended to benefit.

It was a hard time for me personally. I had had no idea how difficult it would be to be alone in a foreign country where consultants came and went and it wasn't worthwhile for most people to bother to get to know them. I missed my friends with a longing I could not have imagined. A serious relationship broke up, with much angst, partly over email miscues. The antimalarial medicine caused anxiety, of which I had no need of extra. Yet – so much to discover!

I learned the value of ignorance and humility and risk taking. But I also learned the value and place of confidence, and I partially failed that test. I did not fully take advantage of the power I held. The Permanent Secretary of the Ministry was an extraordinary man of courage who, as a young student leader, gave a speech on campus about why Idi Amin's plan to exile all foreigners was wrong and would have a huge economic cost. He fled the country disguised as an Indian woman and graduated from Oxford University, returning to help the new government after Amin was finally exiled. He had taken an interest in the project and told me, "you have an open door. Come talk to me anytime."

But I never took him up on the offer. I did go after the first 3 months, when I met him;

I insisted on presenting my initial recommendations in person, despite the lack of an appointment. My reasons for not returning despite his encouragement are muddy, when I look back, and I don't understand why I didn't go. But I regret the lost opportunity to highlight what I was hearing in the office of the powerful man of integrity who could have done the most to address those concerns. That was the wrong time for humility. My job was to make the voices I had listened to heard in that office, and in other places of power. It was the wrong time to be shy and rely on the printed word to make their case.

Conversations with God by Katrina Balovlenkov

On December 21, 2011 I forgot how to pray. After 11 days of fevers, extensive medical testing, 5 days in the hospital, 13 doctors' appointments, and countless bags of IV fluids and electrolytes, I'd lost my baby. I watched it unfold on the sonogram, waiting for her to light up like she had before, asking the doctor if she saw a heartbeat, and the dreaded reply: "No, I'm sorry I don't, Katrina."

I'd come to Quaker meeting in the following weeks wondering where my voice went, where my faith went, and how in the presence of so many loving, faithful people I could get it back. There were messages I knew were meant for me on *fear* and *finding peace with ourselves and others*, but when I closed my eyes and tried to direct my thoughts toward Heaven, it was just heavy and dark.

As a therapist, I can intellectualize my grief into 5 concrete stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. Neither is the almost clichéd reaction of loss of faith in light of personal tragedy lost on me. As a professional, you'd think I would be better at this. I signed up for a retreat hoping to get some direction.

In reflection, my grief began while she was still growing inside of me. I think this is the nature of illness; we prepare preemptively for loss. During my infirmity, my prayers to God became my bargaining. Please, just give

me one more day with her...If you give me this I won't ask for anything else...I was in denial. Surely, other babies have made it through much tougher circumstances. Women in other countries routinely have babies without any prenatal care whatsoever, and I live in a veritable Medical Mecca. Anger?

I've never been one for anger, but I cried like a grounded child "It's Not FAIR" as if births were doled out according to the scales of justice.

In meeting last Sunday, a member stood up and said:

"In a peevish mood, I asked God why haven't I heard? And, as many of you know, I like to turn things around so I asked "Why hasn't God heard from me?" So I asked him, "How are things....what lies heavy on your heart?" And I saw those images and I counted my blessings."

And I saw images in my head of war, famine, dysentery and me sitting alone in my grief in a stone church house on a snowy day. There was a dead ladybug sitting beside me with 19 black spots; her legs tucked up inside of her. Her eyes were so tiny they almost looked painted on and I wondered how she got here and if the damp cold chilled her soul as much as it did mine. I wondered if I too would shrivel up and die from the cold that seemed inside me, around me, even as a room full of f(F)riends focused on the Light.

At the end of the hour, the Clerk commenced "Friends, before we close meeting for worship is there those that you would like us to hold in the light, either in times of joy and celebration or in times of sorrow. And I found myself asking, "God, can you please help me remember how to pray?" I think this is the beginning of acceptance.

Learnings from Life's Difficult Experiences by Jean Pfefferkorn

Like all people, I have experienced difficulties, specifically losses of loved ones. Losses--our health, situations such as a job or home, or a person--are at the base of most life

difficulties. Here are some lessons that I have learned when difficulties tested me:

Lesson 1: Everyone loses sometime. I'm not unique, and many people have suffered more and greater losses than I. When I consider how privileged I am to live here, and how equally deserving others will never live as I do, I am thankful. I remember thankfulness, by writing down three gratitudes each day when I wake up, to start the day with a prayer of thanks.

Lesson 2: I ask God/Guide/Spirit for help, and see myself receiving it, in whatever form it comes. Jesus said, "Ask, and ye shall receive." I also try to see God in whatever path life takes me on.

Lesson 3: I try to have patience with myself, to encourage myself and recognize improvements as they occur. I keep an "atta girl" file to remember when I have done something to be proud of. I look back once in a while to see how far I have come.

Lesson 4: I try to keep fear in the background. Fear lessens my ability to react to changes. If I trust in the universe, in friends and family, and try new things, courage grows.

Lesson 5: I take care of myself with nourishing food, plenty of sleep, and exercise. I cook my favorite healthful foods and walk in the woods.

Lesson 6: I practice mindfulness meditation by focusing on this moment. I follow my breath and watch what my hands are doing, which keeps my mind in the present moment.

Lesson 7: I smile. Research has shown that smiling releases beneficial brain chemicals, relaxes your facial muscles, and lowers your blood pressure. And if you smile at people, they will smile back at you, which is a wonderfully positive feedback loop.

Lesson 8: I don't take other peoples' decisions personally. Each one is responsible for his or her decisions and actions. It's up to me to live my life as well as God gives me Light to see.

Lesson 9: Nothing in the world is static. Today's sorrow may become tomorrow's joy. Wait around and see what happens next!

Thoughts on Challenges: Nothing New, and Nothing Knew

By Jennifer Woodward-Greene

(Note: apologies to the Editor for errors needing time for correction, and sincere appreciation for her patience.)

The challenge here is for me to get personal, to share something of myself with you. To risk that you won't care, or worse, that you will think me silly, unlikable, or worse. Honestly, that is absolutely wrong; forgive me. I cannot go forward with that. I could forget about submitting anything since it is starting out all wrong, or I could delete that sentence now that I see my mistake, as if it never occurred and you would never know. But it seems important to leave it there for you, and for me.

Words are inadequate. I know this in my heart. Good writing communicates well, but good writing is also to the point, and devoid of endless, distracting caveats. It sounds sure. It sounds positive. I am neither. Yet I strive for sincere and thoughtful communication from within, and in my personal outreach to others. I strive to know on a spiritual level that a thought given to me (such as 'write an article on your challenges') is properly sourced by me, and merits action by me. If so, it is my responsibility to do it well. This entire paragraph is a caveat, both mistake and correction! My apologies. To the point: I am uncomfortable with the following in that the sentences may sound 'sure,' however my thought remains that I should share to the best of my abilities. Maybe the words will be of some use to you, they have been to me.

Concern over what you think of me is a product of our human condition, or conditioning. What you think of me is not mine to hold or to care for; it is yours. I cannot sustainably affect your thoughts or actions and to think I can is demeaning and disrespectful to both of us. It shows a severe lack of humility. If I chose to spend my precious gift of life and energy holding and caring for other's thoughts or actions -whether I agree or disagree- then I am

distracted in mind and body from perceiving (discerning) the only thoughts and actions I can affect, my own. Note, this does not negate the value of human discourse and responsibility, but injects that its inspiration spring from the self, rather than from stewardship or reparation of other's thoughts and actions. Risk is the inverse of challenge, i.e. averting the risk of losing humility, requires meeting the challenge to keep it. Both take effort.

So, the risk/challenge for me in this space, and in any space on any day, is not what you think of me, rather, it is losing my humility by way of my or others perception of my words and thoughts.

Words and thoughts are memes, or the ideas of the shared *creative* heritage of our species. Memes are similar to genes, the shared *biological* heritage of our species. Memes are as much inside as outside of me. They are fluid, and come through me. Like any biological gene, they are subject to 'survival of the fittest' and the opportunity and risk of silent, productive, or lethal mutation as they move in and among populations. The meme arises from some origin, is passed from one to another, and survives only as long as your eyes can gaze upon it, or maybe for a reflective hour, or one lifetime, or may be shared by many, or passed across generations and populations. A meme unshared, may never see the light of day, which may be a gain, or a loss, or of no consequence. There is no way to know. They may be clear and distinct, or hidden in a barrage of incredulity. Thought or spoken, they are nothing if not lived, yet they cannot live if not thought or spoken. It does not matter who thinks, speaks, or lives them, or if one or many does any of those steps.

Living is what we do. Living is truth. Perception is reality. What people say and what people do (live) are not always the same; and what people mean by their words and actions, is not always what is perceived. These may be thoughtful (intentional) or not, and are common observations. Humility is an openness of heart and mind allowing for alternate perspectives (realities), and for global truths or so-

lutions that we cannot see or understand without this openness. It is the greatest challenge, and an opportunity for unlimited growth.

Humans are often conditioned to suppress, ignore, or recast difficult events or be people, and joyful events or groups can become a focal point for direction, satisfaction, power, and engagement. These pursuits are at the expense of keeping in touch with the innate knowledge inside each of us. I call these distractions, and they make life confusing and complicated. They seem based on the human conditioning to fit our activities into an acceptable life story, rather than to embrace the realities and resources of our simple living truth, the homogenized balance of good and evil, joy and pain. This is life's contrast.

Contrast is what makes color, feeling, and light discernible. It allows for beauty, which by necessity allows for ugly. Each extreme is equally important, lest perception blends into a narrow, bland spectrum of joyless, pasty comfort, until it is broken by some unfor-giving truth. When it happens that way, we are unprepared, surprised, and hurt.

My motto: the worst kind of wrong is sure. So, I share my lesson, my meme, for what it is worth: I focus on humility that I may hear spiritual thoughts and words clearly, and I believe they are always inside me, as an eternal resource to answer the question, "what should I do?" I believe that letting my life speak them is my role and nothing else. And in that living action, the tools I need in order to hear them clearly and live them fully are on board- if only I can listen for them with an open, humble heart.

**My Meeting Presents a Challenge:
*On Being Appointed to Patapsco Religious
Education Committee - A draft letter to the
Clerk of RE* by Stuart Greene**

Hi Matt,

As Friends might recall, at the January RE meeting (my first) I mentioned to the committee that I was unsure of my leading regarding this appointment. I related that there may have been a misunderstanding between the

member of the Nominating Committee who called to interview me and myself because I didn't think I had volunteered for RE in our conversation although I had told of being led to attend a workshop on RE at an FGC Gathering once.

As the days have gone by since our meeting, it has become clear that I am in conflict with the Spirit's plan for me by being on the RE Committee. I haven't had the internal movement that I associate with the Spirit leading me. My concern is that going forward without a leading is an opportunity to do harm. As I contemplate this, it seems the Spirit has arranged useful opportunities (numbered below) for me to evaluate my sense of the Spirit's beckoning.

1. Although I was excited to have the opportunity to teach first day school last Sunday and had an idea of what I might do I ended up doing harm. The children I thought I might have didn't show so I settled into Meeting for Worship as usual. Unfortunately, I missed the presence of a little girl and her mother who had come in later and reportedly sat behind me. Evidently I wasn't plugged into the job enough to realize the obvious – that I must stay attentive in case visiting children showed up. They left early because the child got bored. In my search for clearness this is not a positive sign.
2. There is also a conflict that developed today involving the RE Committee meeting scheduled for Feb. 15th at my house. A support committee meeting for a Friend has been scheduled since then for the same time slot and I am feeling within me the encouragement of the Spirit for this service.
3. A message of the Spirit has come to me since the January meeting that "I may be lead to a new visitation." This nudging may involve visiting more distant Meetings this year and if so I must be

free on Sundays to come and go as the Spirit leads. My history is that the Spirit gives me adequate notice but it's often on Saturday evening or Sunday morning.

4. If February's RE meeting reverts to 'Committee Sunday' this month I will also have a conflict. I have been asked to sit in with Peace and Social Concerns because they will be considering my request for clearness regarding another prospective leading to "calm the rhetoric". This service is one I feel as clear as one can without its yet being confirmed by Friends.

My Blessing:

Although my general intention is to be attentive to the Spirit and Trust so that I will be shown the way to clearness, I sat down to write this letter unsettled and quite unclear. The leading sentence to my first draft was, "I am not sure of my leading to RE service" but in the act of Spirit listening and writing, the fog began to lift, and as I neared the end. there was little doubt that I must not continue in this appointment. This experimental evidence that God was in fact guiding me in my search for clearness is potent. The Great Spirit does this sort of thing for me consistently, which is a blessing but it is also not to be overlooked that I am at this point in my life more often aware of what probably has always been the case. I am feeling the latter blessing as the most significant for me in this moment because as I look back upon my life I can see that I was being cared for all the way and likely had many discernment opportunities like this one that I squandered because of my poorly developed skill in message reception and a lukewarm intention to be obedient. These little moments of encouragement are so dear to me. They keep me going with a smile.

Yeee Haw! Life is good!

