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Editor's Note:

The theme of this issue of the Quaker Heron is "Embracing the Other." Many thanks to the writers for their wonderful and thoughtful responses.

-Ramona Buck

Embracing This Country of Ours

By Pav Govindasamy

It seems like only yesterday when I first stepped into the United States of America
But a quarter of a century is truly a long time ago
To have given up part of what I was, to become what I wanted to be
Excited, optimistic and yearning for all that I had read about and seen
Nervous that my sense of what the country meant may not quite be the same
Once I had a closer encounter of all that the country was.

My first port of entry was Chicago where I expected everyone to be toting a gun
You can't spend a night here I thought or I will surely be killed
A lone stranger in an even stranger place lost in the gangster world
Before I had made a mark in this culture, and a dent in my own.
So off I flew to Michigan to a much saner environment
To learn all about Karl Marx and capitalism and the American Dream
So long denied my intellectual curiosity because it was equated with communism.

Graduate study was all that I had dreamt it to be

Bombarded with exposure to new thoughts and ideas

By professors who wanted to be called by their first names

Took some getting used to that but soon it dawned on me

Professors are your intellectual buddies, their main aim to encourage individuality

I felt a sense of freedom to be able to express what was in my head

And no fear of being imprisoned under Malaysia's dreaded Internal Security Act.

With employment came a new maturity

The realization that education is not accessible to everybody

Even though the opportunities were plentiful

The social structure posed a barrier denying equality to all

Freedom of expression did not guarantee accessibility and acceptance

Racism and bigotry abound in a land of plenty

Poverty and discrimination clearly displayed in everyday life.

Kept in its place by elected officials

mouthed what you wanted to hear

But practicing a different kind of governance

Ensuring the status quo is what keeps

America the greatest country they said

Being friends with your foes is important to maintain the balance of power

And when the time comes easy to topple
them when they digress
Disregarding the impact on the majority
women and children
As their policies continue to do here too in
America.

Embracing the Jesus Story

By Elizabeth Meyer

It was during my first year of participation in the Baltimore Yearly Meeting Spiritual Formation Program when I embraced the “other” in the story of Jesus. Since childhood, I had carried bad feelings for the theology of evangelical Christians. It was a grudge formed as well-meaning folk tried to save my soul, telling me I would surely burn in hell if I did not confess Jesus as my Lord and savior. To me, this seemed like a kind of magical thinking: pie in the sky when you die.

Seeking a spiritual community that lived Christian values but that did not require confession to the Christian creed, I had become a Quaker as a young adult. I was happy to ignore Christian spirituality as I navigated the Quaker spiritual path. Then when I was in my 30’s, I joined the BYM Spiritual Formation Program. As I began reading the spiritual classics, the following question entered my thoughts, and would not let go: The story of Jesus has been around for almost 2000 years. To have survived for so long, the story *itself* must have something – a spiritual power, perhaps? – that has caused it to endure. What is it?

By this time, I knew enough about the power of myth to understand that there had to be something in the story of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection that has helped humans live fuller, more satisfying lives. It has nothing to do with what may or may not have happened 2000 years ago or with what may or may not happen to each of us as we pass from this existence. It has to be

something about the story itself that gives it the staying power. This intellectual curiosity liberated me from the burden of the prejudice born years before and carried since childhood. Now I could approach the Christian scriptures with the mindset of an explorer eager to venture into uncharted territory.

I have been exploring the question ever since, asking myself: Where is the Madonna within me? Where is the doubting Thomas? The Mary and Martha? The Judas? When it has felt difficult to accept God’s will, I have been with Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. Indeed, letting go of our own plans in order to embrace the Divine will is what earlier Friends called “taking on the cross.” I have found that God’s awesome power can turn human suffering and humiliation into glory. But what of those folks who do not share my interpretation of the Jesus story? Can I be in fellowship with those who insist that every word in the Bible is literally true?

Understanding that the meaning of the Jesus story is personal to each Christian, I have no desire to persuade others to view the story my way. Instead, I can respect and embrace all Christians because we have the story in common. I can hold my own interpretation lightly, curious to learn how the story of Jesus has spoken to others. God has given us humans the gift of curiosity. It can be a powerful force for overcoming prejudice.

Is Every Woman a Princess? By Michelle Dunn

Stephanie, my coworker, would have you believe that this is true. She calls herself ‘Princess.’ She exuberates self-confidence and has deified all odds to succeed and inspire many. Growing up in Washington, DC to a single African American mother and having learning differences that impacted her ability to learn how to fully

read and write, she still managed to become a self-sufficient adult.

She started her work at our company as a warehouse staff person stocking, packing, and doing most of anything that needed to be done. Eventually, someone on the administrative team offered her an office support position that required computer skills. Although Stephanie felt a bit overwhelmed because she could barely type her name, the administrator fully encouraged her to accept this new role. Due to her learning differences it sometimes took her longer than some others to learn a process or skill. Once learned, however, she owned the job, added her unique touch, and mastered the oversight completely independently.

When I first saw her, we did not interact. Stephanie was a support employee, but also worked a second job cleaning our office in the evenings. It seemed she was always there - the first to arrive in the morning and the last to leave in the evening. As my role for the company changed, it required me to work longer hours which also coincided with a period of personal growth. One night while I was working late and Stephanie was cleaning the office, she sensed my spirit needed lifting, so she reached out and helped me.

Eventually we became friends and realized that we were the same age, had similar life goals, and shared spiritual paths. We often walked during lunch, supporting each other through life's rough patches and sharing its successes.

Around this time, our company developed a program on which I worked for students with learning differences. Over time this program needed some data entry assistance and Stephanie felt a strong desire to help support it. She was now operating out of her knowledge and comfort zone, but continually pushed herself to improve. Due to the complicated nature of some of the jobs, it would sometimes take much time to

train her. I learned patience, real patience, along with the knowledge that the time that I put in came back to reward the program in ways that far exceeded our expectations.

Each job that she has taken on, she now successfully manages and maintains independent of any oversight and monitoring. She continually thinks outside the box for ways to improve the experience for our users and clients. Each job is now better than when she initially took it over. Sometimes you meet someone who is wise, who tells you things in a simple, yet profound way that change your life; like an old soul who has spent time on this Earth before and who has profound insight and wisdom.

With Stephanie I can ask questions about our cultural differences that I would not have had the courage to ask of anyone else. She has shown me the importance of non-judgment, that there is often much more to a person than what we initially perceive; and that everyone is entitled to a chance. That no matter what our background, social status, pay scale, role or race, everyone is connected through the Divine. Someone you initially perceive as knowing less than you could in turn become your teacher. They may even hold some secrets of life. Never doubt the mysterious nature of God. Be open to all possibilities. My life is profoundly better as a result of Stephanie's presence.

Embracing the Other

by John Farrell

Respond to The Other? Embrace The Other? Who's 'The Other'? Sometimes the most obvious answer to a question is right in front of us, yet we often have such difficulty perceiving it. Isn't responding to 'The Other' the basic practice of Christianity? Aren't we called to serve, help and love one another...no conditionality, no exceptions? Remember this from Matthew 25 35:40?

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’

And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’ ”

It was with this passage in mind that I joined with several other Patapsco Friends and started going to the Maryland Correctional Institution in Hagerstown (MCI-H) to meet with what would become our South Mountain Friends Fellowship, thus opening one of the richest and most rewarding chapters of my life. Worshiping with my South Mountain Friends has taught me invaluable lessons in courage, tolerance, patience, love and forgiveness. Each visit only reinforces this perception. Clearly, we are called to reach out and help one another, to constantly engage in building a loving community. This process inevitably leads to ever deeper searching and, ultimately, new understanding of one's own experience. For me, this mindful process is always one of remembering...and then forgetting, remembering and then forgetting again. By continually trying to practice my faith and Quaker testimonies, I'm confident that even though I might tend to forget 'The Other' from time to time, I have developed a methodology of remembrance.

Bottom line? I guess I really don't believe in 'The Other.' 'The Other', after all, is me.

Embracing the Other – From the Streets to Prison

by Ronald Brandt

At 50 years old, I was sentenced to 25 years in prison.

I, Ronald, an alcoholic and drug addict, on July 28, 2008, made the biggest mistake of my life. Upset over a break-up with my girlfriend; losing her, my home and being accused of stealing a pick-up truck that I had paid for myself; letting my emotions and anger get the best of me, I got behind the wheel of that truck, drunk and high on cocaine. Saying to myself, “I’ll fix her; I’ll give her the truck, smashed up!” I drove to our home, crashing the truck through the front fence. It’s like my eyes were closed the entire time because I don’t remember anything that happened that night, which resulted in me hurting my ex-girlfriend and another friend very badly.

At sentencing, I plead guilty for my actions, at which time I received 25 years in prison. Feeling hopeless, scared, and thinking that my life was over, I asked myself, “How can I get through this?”

I had to make a decision right then, either to rip and run, or to change from the person I had become. All of my life’s troubles and bad choices were made while I was under the influence of alcohol and drugs. I stopped using right then and there! I was going to change my way of living! Even behind these prison walls, I can be the best person I was meant to be.

I invited God into my life, asking Him to forgive me for what I had done. Night after night, I prayed to comfort all the people I had harmed and to guide me to be a better person, loving anyone who came my way. I wanted to start helping people instead of hurting them.

There was still something missing from my life. I attended several different kinds of religious services, but I still hadn’t found what I was searching for. Recently, I

joined the Quaker group and I believe I now have found the connection I have been looking for quite some time.

The silent prayer time is an opportunity for me and God to communicate together in prayer. I have five years in, now, and with the help of my Higher Power, I now believe I can get through this one day at a time.

God bless our Quaker group and all its members!

Stepping Out of the Comfort Zone

by Darren (Tony) McCoy

It's often things that we fear or don't understand that move us out of our comfort zone, as is the subject of spirituality for me for which I truly confess both my ignorance and fear. Although I do consider myself researching the path of enlightenment, guilt and shame are obstacles I find hard to avoid.

When asked to live more GOD like or like Jesus conducted himself, I find myself looking in the mirror, assessing the changes needing to be made. That glimpse of humanity is hard to swallow when my silhouette is tattooed with so much about immorality and deceit. The criminal and addict that I've become over the years has been asking and begging for the wrong things for so many years that it has become second nature. In the end, I always found myself asking my Mother, my significant other, the judge, and even the victims of my petty crimes over and over to forgive me. Never did it dawn on me to forgive myself.

A sober inventory of my character revealed the Monster that I had become. It seemed that there was no zone of comfort that would replace the years I've wasted, repay the debt I've incurred or heal the people that I've harmed. The notion that GOD forgives me does provide a focal point which allows me to still hold up my head and hopefully make amends for my transgressions before I die. Perhaps in

another environment, I could find some sort of productive distraction against the uncomfortable circumstances of prison. In these walls, your comfort zone is compromised in multiple areas.

We live in a bedroom the size of a closet. The food is not the most nutritional or filling. There is that elephant in the room that demands I concentrate on my safety at all times. This is also a very lonely and very aggravating experience. Everyone is not on a spiritual journey, so their behavior may not be conducive to your practices.

I do realize that even imprisoned, I live a blessed life. There are those who would kill to live in my conditions. I appreciate waking up every day for there are people in Haiti, the Philippines and other places who unfortunately did not wake up. I'm not in control and probably never was but spiritually, I pray that it's God's influences that I follow now. Faith has me in a pretty comfortable zone recently. So a Monster, I may still be, but today, "I forgive!"

For Kenny: my "Other"

by Bethanne Kashkett

Thanks to Mr. Cheqmakas, he sat in front of me in Integrated Algebra and Trigonometry. Since I am allergic to numbers, he was the main reason I passed. I was the one who didn't follow him out at 3 am when he threw pebbles against my bedroom window. "Are you insane?!" I whispered..."my parents will kill me!" He and his brother were a bit wild, fueled by the fact that their parents were older and more tired than mine.

"We're just friends," I told my sister, despite the fact that he was a permanent fixture at our house.

He was the editor and chief of the yearbook and had the key to the SGA (student government) room where all the cool kids hung out. I was a card-carrying

member of the Farm Workers Union, picketed grocery stores and wrote songs on the piano. He was the chairman of the senior prom.

I landed in the dorm next to his at University of Maryland. He was in Ellicott Hall, I was in La Plata. He took me to drop/add in the armory and sat with me in the dining hall. I was overwhelmed and homesick. He worked for campus police and could park anywhere he wanted.

“We’re just friends,” I told my father and we were...from the time I was 15 until I was 18 years old.

And then, we weren’t.

It was snowing late one January night when he walked me home from Mckeldon Library. On the steps of my new dorm, Somerset, he kissed me. We “turned a corner”, as my dad liked to say. From then until now, he’s been the keeper of my heart and the captain of my “pit crew”.

Though life has not always been smooth or easy- it has always been easier because we are together. Through births and deaths, teenagers and 14 cats...I’ve always known he’s got my back- And I’ve always had his.

Whatever good fortune I’ve been blessed with in this life...nothing will ever surpass the random seat assigned to me in 10th grade.

Embracing the “Other”

by Jean Pfefferkorn

In 2013, we live in a mobile society. Ready availability of transportation and communication technology allows us previously unknown opportunities for knowing otherness. If we can embrace these experiences without fear, we can enjoy the gifts of the “others.”

I’ve been blessed in my life with a rich assortment of opportunities to embrace the “other.” As a child, as my family moved up and down the East Coast, following my

father’s career, I was exposed to new people and new subcultures. Living in different places for extended periods of time was key to understanding others deeply.

When I was 15, we moved to Brunswick, Maine, a small town with a healthy minority of French Canadian people, who called themselves Canoocks. I had a vigorous experience of difference. The Canadians spoke French and lived with a bit more joie de vivre than we more-conservative Americans. Their homes were brightly-painted, and their style of dress was bigger and brighter too. Not permanent citizens, the French Canadians lived on the poorer side of town, and maintained large, close extended families. I enjoyed their sense of fun, their Catholic spirituality, and tight-knit community.

When I started working in the library later in life, another “otherness” experience: meeting the many immigrants from Africa who lived in the area and visited the library often. Like the French Canadians, they also spoke other languages--or spoke English with such a heavy African accent that they had to repeat themselves. I admired the quiet dignity in their carriage, their clothing impeccable over beautiful deep brown skin. Their cleanliness and lovely coloring impressed me--I had not met people like them before. As they visited the library, I found how driven they were to excel and to become part of our country.

These are only two examples of my cross-cultural experiences. What I have learned is that far more unites us as human beings than divides us. Embracing the other is much like embracing our own loved ones and family members--accepting the differences without reservations.