

My Spiritual Journey – Marguerite Chandler (5/10/15)

Thanks for the opportunity talk about my spiritual journey. Life is a journey—and you are my teachers. Every life experience I’ve had—good or bad—has been a classroom. I can be pretty stubborn and hard-headed, so sometimes I’ve been ready for the teaching and other times I’ve needed the proverbial “whack in the side of the head” to get the message!

Someone once said that the purpose of life is “to grow in wisdom and to learn to love more.” At the beginning of my adult life, I was unconsciously caught up in the tidal pull of wealth and power differences. For the past 25 years—and I suspect for the rest of my life—I’ve been exploring the great ocean of love (what George Fox described as “an ocean of darkness surrounded by an even greater ocean of Light”). It’s probably no coincidence that the most frequent messages in the Bible in the New Testament are “Fear not” and “Love one another.” So maybe my journey is a Love story!

Today, I’ll describe three major streams that have converged in my life:

1. How my **“problems” became opportunities** (i.e., what I thought were “bad” things, God eventually turned into “good” things)
2. My **spiritual awakening** (i.e., I have no control over my circumstances, but I **do** have a choice about my attitude about those circumstances)
3. **Listen and learn** (i.e., the still, small voice that leads me **if** I listen)

I hope my remarks today will speak to some of you of **your** lives. You’ve already contributed to **me** by inviting me to go on this journey.

So let’s start with **“How my problems (or “challenges” as I like to call them) turned into opportunities.”**

- I was born during the fearful uncertainty of the last years of World War II. Both my parents were away most of the time, so my brother was sent to my mother’s parents. My mother’s parents, Grandma and Grandpa Moore, seemed more easy-going. I was left in the care of my father’s mother, Grandma Chandler, a strict disciplinarian. But, I later learned, Grandpa Moore was an active alcoholic who had sexually abused my mother as a child. The **good news** (for me), I later saw, was that Grandma Chandler was an educated woman, strong in spirit, who taught me a life-long love of books and an excellent work ethic. Later in life my brother became an alcoholic—and I became a workaholic (“workaholism” is the addiction of choice for those who feel unworthy).
- After the war, my mother came down with double pneumonia, then tuberculosis (TB). She was hospitalized for two years. My father moved our family to an isolated farm in Pattenburg, NJ. At age seven, my brother was sent to a military boarding school. I continued to be raised by Grandma Chandler, and there were no other children within a mile of our farm. The **good news** (for me) was that I was taught by my grandmother, and I had nothing much to do with myself but spend time reading or playing outdoors. I learned to observe the changes of the seasons. I

studied the shapes of the leaves on the trees. I ran through the cornfields, picked wild flowers, caught pollywogs in the brook, and on summer evenings, loved to listen to crickets and capture lightning bugs in a jar. I spent a lot of time reading books (mostly biographies)—and listening to my dad’s collection of Broadway musicals (mostly upbeat, can-do, optimistic stories)!

- After my mother was released from the TB sanatorium, she couldn’t stay in the North during the cold, damp New Jersey winters, so she and I moved to a home my father built for us in St. Petersburg, FL. That meant I was transferred in and out of school twice a year every year for the first eight years of school—attending school in New Jersey from Sept. to Thanksgiving, in Florida from Thanksgiving to Easter, then moving back to NJ for school from Easter to June. There were no children near where we lived in Florida either. I wasn't in any school long enough to make friends, and I was never allowed to sleep over or go off with other kids to their houses. I spent most of my time around my mother and other older adults where I became a quite opinionated, little-old-lady type of a child. The **good news** was that I developed a preference for classical music, became very good at amusing myself and spending time alone, and learned **not** to care much about what my schoolmates thought about me. Books became my best friends—and I read a **lot**.
- In my Senior year, I met Ron, my high school sweetheart. He was the class Salutatorian, co-captain of the football team, voted Most Likely To Succeed, and he’d won a full scholarship to Brown University. He was also from a very poor family whose father was an alcoholic and whose mother suffered a massive stroke that left her paralyzed. The **good news** was that his enthusiasm for higher education awakened **my** interest in going to college too. And even though my father didn’t like Ron and forbade me to see him—which only bonded me to Ron even more—after college graduation four years later, we got married. But his idealism (and his desire to avoid the Viet Nam War) caused us to join the Peace Corps and spend two years in Caquixajay, a remote rural village in Guatemala (a life-changing experience living with indigenous people), where I learned to speak basic Spanish and where our son Mark was born.
- A year and a half later back in the States, our second son Adam arrived. By then, Ron had become an absentee father and an active alcoholic. When Adam turned 2 and Mark was 3 ½, I finally decided to divorce him, and in that decision, I became a single parent with two pre-school children. The **good news** was—for the next 7 years—I was forced to become more creative about childcare, creating playgroups and doing home sharing with a series of housemates. I began to work outside the home, became more independent, and learned I could survive without a man to take care of me. I became active in the Women’s Movement, discovered the Religious Society of Friends, joined the Plainfield, NJ Quaker meeting, and discovered the life-giving importance of communal silence and community.

- Seven years later, Richmond and I decided to live together and thought we'd formed the "perfect" union (two responsible adults who were formerly married to alcoholics)—**unwittingly** bringing our co-dependent patterns into our relationship and taking on the challenges of step parenting (he, with Mark and Adam, ages 11 & 9, and me with his daughter Laura, also age 11). The **good news** was that our problems with perfectionism, comparison, needing to be "right," workaholism, fear of intimacy, lack of trust, and years of buried anger and resentment brought me to the doors of AlAnon. (I've been a grateful member of AlAnon for more than 25 years.)

All my life I've been led by small, seemingly insignificant signs: a chance word overheard in a cafeteria, a song on the car radio, a Bible passage, a poem someone emails me, a book that someone mentions. It was only when I became a Quaker in my early 30's that I heard the word "leading"—and recognized my experience. When I receive a "leading," something comes alive in me, and I turn from the way I am going to a new direction. Perhaps one of my biggest blessings is that I'm a "yes" to Spirit, to that still, small voice, to these "leadings." And more and more over the years, I've learned to trust them and follow them—and **therein challenges became opportunities.**

Now let's move on to my second topic: **my "spiritual awakening."**

One of my early "leadings" was to go on retreat to Holy Cross, an Episcopal monastery overlooking the Hudson River in West Park, NY. I puzzled why I should be "led" to Holy Cross when Pendle Hill made much more sense for me as a Quaker. I arrived at Holy Cross unannounced, was "welcomed as Christ" and discovered the beauty of silent retreat, regular times for communal prayer, and meditation. I also discovered the joy of Bible study and mined the wealth of their excellent monastic bookstore and the theology of Henri Knowen, Dietrich Bonhoffer, and others. I also got to observe first hand the challenges and strengths of people living in an intentional community. Of course, the first person I confided in when I returned home was a friend who was a life-long Episcopalian, Richmond Shreve—the one person I felt safe to talk to about my budding spirituality.

A new question was beginning to grow in me: if I wanted to live the life that God called me to, how would I know? Discernment has always been a rare spiritual gift. Then I was led to a passage (Galatians 5:22-23) that said, "When the Holy Spirit controls our lives, s/he will produce this kind of fruit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." From that day, this helps me clear my mind and see when I'm wandering off track—and when others are too. From the fruit you know the tree!

A couple of years later, Richmond and I were married in the Plainfield Meeting. We've now been together for 38 years. It wasn't until we were celebrating our 25th wedding anniversary that I looked carefully at the Quaker wedding certificate that had been hanging on the wall by our front door for all those years—and noticed a critical

piece I'd forgotten. It said, *"Then, in like manner, Marguerite did declare that she took Richmond to be her husband, promising with Divine Assistance, to be unto him a loving and faithful wife so long as they both shall live."*

I'd developed a practice of journal writing since the early days of my divorce. I'd read Unity's daily meditations since my college days. I'd learned to meditate, gone through therapy, spent years in a women's consciousness raising group. But it was those three words—**with Divine Assistance**—that showed me how God had been watching over our marriage and helping us through all our hard, challenging times.

The more I paid attention to my "leadings," the clearer the leadings became. After my divorce, I was led to participate in many human development and growth seminars. Then one day in 1978, I discovered The Hunger Project, a non-profit whose purpose is to "create the political will to end hunger in the world by the year 2000." I'd always been drawn to social justice issues, but this time I was moved into action. Seeing the courage and dignity of Black Somali women who walked miles across a desert carrying their children in hopes of finding food, I saw myself as a single mother. As I was led to this work, I overcame many things I didn't think I could do: I learned to stand on street corners and ask people to sign postcards to take a stand for the "end of hunger." I learned to fundraise. I learned public speaking. I learned effective organizing. And I was drawn to the words of Peace Pilgrim, a 65-year-old woman from New Jersey who walked over 25,000 miles for peace, walking "until given shelter and fasting til given food"—and to Mother Teresa who worked with the poorest of the poor.

Through my volunteerism, I was invited to represent The Hunger Project in Sri Lanka at an international gathering for appropriate technology for third world countries. After I'd agreed to go, I was "led" in one of my morning meditations to the idea of **meeting** Mother Teresa and working with The Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta on my way home from Sri Lanka. I made my flight reservations from Newark to Sri Lanka to Calcutta with no information about where I might stay in India. People kept asking me, "How do you know that Mother Teresa will be there? She travels all over the world!" But once I'm led, the clarity and the courage follow, and I just kept making plans.

Then out of the blue, I got a call from Jane Nelson at Kirkridge who said she'd heard I was going to Calcutta to work with the Missionaries of Charity, and someone she'd spoken to had just come back from working in the Home for the Dying. Jane gave me the name of a *pension* where I could stay and the phone number of the Mother House.

The day after I arrived in Calcutta, I called a taxi. "Take me to the Mother House of Mother Teresa," I told the driver. "Who?" he asked. Mother Teresa had already received the Nobel Peace Prize, and it was a great lesson for me that no one is famous everywhere. So I gave him the address, and he dropped me off. When I arrived unannounced (apparently a common practice for volunteers there), Mother Teresa entered just a few minutes after I did. As she greeted her sisters and the volunteers like me who were waiting for their assignments for the day, she asked me, "Why are you here?"

“I’m here because of my commitment to end hunger in the world,” I replied. She said, “You know there’s hunger in your own community.” And I responded, “Well, I come from a very wealthy community, but if there’s hunger there, I’ll do something about it.”

The first day I was assigned to the Home for Abandoned Babies and to the Home for the Dying for the rest of the week. I saw Mother Teresa come and go, speaking with equal compassion to everyone—dignitaries, street beggars, or visitors of all ages from many nations. And I saw, working in the Home for the Dying, that despite the differences between the poorest of the poor who had been dying on the streets of Calcutta and we volunteers who had come from around the world—that we were all the same in our loneliness, in our hunger, in our need to be seen and valued. The ancient Hindu woman I was asked to feed was a person just like me, a person who could have been my Grandma Chandler.

That experience inspired all the non-profits I later founded, starting two months after I returned from Calcutta, with a headline in our local paper about Mrs. Ortman, a 72 year-old woman who was freezing and starving in her own house—one block off Main Street in Somerville, NJ, the county seat of Somerset County, the 2nd wealthiest county in the nation. I felt “called” to respond, and Richmond and I took her into our home, organizing hundreds of volunteers who helped restore her damaged house. Her gift to us and to our community was to allow us to open the non-profit Food Bank Network and to distribute food from her home, one day a week. The Food Bank’s purpose is “to end hunger in our community”—to be the safety net that catches people who might fall through the cracks of the traditional welfare system—people like her. The Food Bank led to the founding of the Handyman Project (by Richmond), the PeopleCare Center, the Somerset County Family Shelter, Working Wardrobe, Homesharing, and on and on. So that’s **what my spiritual awakening looked like.**

Now to the third stream: **Listen and learn.** In college, as my worldview began to expand, I began to ask the question, “Why are some people rich and some people poor?” My dad’s answer was that wealth came from hard work. My mother’s answer was that since we were “better off” than others, it was our responsibility to help them.

God used my life to bring me—sometimes gently, sometimes jarringly—to a very different answer. My Peace Corps years showed me that while people might live in desperate circumstances, they laughed often and enjoyed simple pleasures (like the Guatemalan women in my village who gathered each day to talk and walk a mile downhill and back—balancing clay pots of water on their heads!). They loved their children and wanted a better life for them just as I did for mine. The Hunger Project volunteering I did opened my eyes to the strength and dignity of people in resource-poor circumstances. I was humbled by their courage, creativity, resourcefulness, and faith—and how they worked together and shared what they had. No one works harder to end hunger than poor people themselves. I also saw the effects of **extreme poverty**—how it can grind the life out of people, cause needless sickness and death for lack of a few pennies for food or medicine, create anger, resentment, and fear.

My brother's alcoholism, after he'd spent two years in the Navy in Viet Nam, opened the door for me to come into the family business (leasing industrial warehouses). That work gave me a platform to draw others to the work I felt called to do (like restoring Mrs. Ortman to her tiny home or creating the PeopleCare Center to house numerous non-profits). But I also got to see how **wealth** can harden people's hearts, turn them against one another, blind people to see the need right in front of them, create distrust, anger, resentment and fear.

Mother Teresa often told her audiences, "Some people ask me, 'Why do you spoil the poor?'" "Well," she'd tell them, "Everyone spoils the rich." She also observed that "our work is to do small things with great love," and leave the results to God. She also said, "Everyone is needy. Some of us are needy for bread or shelter. And some of us are needy for work that matters and for meaning in our lives. Our work with the poor will save us all."

Years later, Richmond and I called together a small group of people at Holy Cross Monastery, in an inquiry about the nature of "wealth and poverty." Some had generations of inherited wealth, some had chosen poverty (like the monks), some were middle class, and some lived in poor circumstances but were resourceful. The two questions we answered during the time we spent together were: "Do you have enough?" and "If not, how will you know when you have enough?" The conclusion we arrived at after talking with each other over our weekend together was, "If you have a beloved community [however you defined it], you felt you had enough. If you didn't have a community, no matter how much money you had, you felt you didn't have enough."

This insight changed me. When I took over the family business, Richmond and I began to run it as a caring community. We made sure we paid our employees fairly and provided educational and child care benefits. We encouraged our employees to learn and grow and supported them in taking risks. We shared what **we** were learning as we grew and helped them to see their connection and contribution to the work I was being recognized for in the world (there are no lesser or greater "parts"—only different aspects of contributing to the whole). When I received the Presidential Award from President Reagan, we took all our employees to Washington, DC with us to share in the honor—and we used the recognition to do the next work in the community.

Then 10 years ago, after I'd retired from business, I attended the Awakening the Dreamer, Changing the Dream Symposium, a 3-hour event whose purpose is "to create an environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling and socially just human presence." I saw how these 3 issues are an interconnected whole, how when you work on one issue, you work on all issues, how we're all connected—despite appearances to the contrary. I was so deeply inspired and empowered that I was led to become trained as a facilitator, and I organized more than 100 Symposiums—always with one or more other facilitators, as we learned and grew together.

A few years later, when my heart had been softened enough and my spirit was ready to receive the message, I was invited by a Marianist priest to attend a workshop in

Camden, NJ on “white privilege.” I was immediately repulsed by those words, so I knew I needed to go. I’ve learned that everyone and everything around me is a mirror, and that what upsets me, angers me, or frightens me is there to teach me. My priest friend and I spent the evening hearing people of color **talk** while we white people **listened** to stories of the indignities, insults, brutality, invisibility, and injustice they face daily—no matter what their level of education or professional achievement or economic success. One older Black man, a diplomat, spoke about being invited to a cocktail party among the wealthy and powerful in Washington, DC. He told how he was dressed in a tuxedo like all the other men, but he recalled how many times people mistook him for a waiter and asked him to bring them a drink or take away their empty glass.

Now, more and more, we are being given opportunities to wake up from our unconscious racism—from movies like 12 Years a Slave and The Butler to the number of men of color who will be incarcerated during their lifetime (1 in 3—most for non-violent crimes), the number of people of color who are on death row for killing a white person (80%), to images of police tear gassing or attacking citizens who are peacefully protesting, to disparities in school resources, in opportunities for higher education, in home ownership, in wealth between the richest 1/10 of 1% and all the people who work minimum wage jobs.

We can’t achieve environmental sustainability until we address social justice issues. We can’t have peace of mind and heart without clean water to drink and clean air to breathe. We can’t achieve a thriving, healthy **economy** without a thriving, healthy **ecology**. We’re all impoverished by the loss of one child’s potential. Black lives matter. All lives matter. We need to get along with people different than ourselves. We need to learn to love one another. As a sign I used to have on my desk said, “No one is free until everyone is free.”

A great deal of research has demonstrated that happiness isn’t about acquiring things or achieving social status. Sustainable happiness comes from “loving relationships, thriving natural and human communities, opportunities for meaningful work, and a few simple practices, like gratitude.”* As Fr. David Stendl-Rast says so eloquently, “**We’re not grateful because we’re happy. We’re happy because we’re grateful.**” This is what it looked like for me to **listen and learn**: to recognize the great full-ness of my life.

(*from Sustainable Happiness: Live Simply, Live Well, Make a Difference, edited by Sarah Van Gelder and the staff of *YES!* magazine)

So this brings my spiritual journey full turn. God has opened my heart and mind, step by step, to become more useful to do the work that I’m called to do. I’m more patient and gentle with myself—and others. I can see the humor in my mistakes—and the mistakes of others. I can celebrate **progress**—not perfection. I can let go and let God.

Richmond and I have learned to be more kind to each other, to savor our time together, to be appreciative of the “little things” we do every day for each other, to not take each other for granted—and to ask each other for forgiveness when we forget.

I’m grateful for wise teachers—like my Grandma Chandler, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mother Teresa, Anne Wilson Schaef, Joel Goodman, Nelson Mandela, Maya Angelou, Maria Nemeth, Pema Chodron, Thich Nhat Hahn, Lynne Twist, Richard Rohr, Bill and Dr. Bob and the first 100 alcoholics who wrote the Big Book of AA, and to Lois Wilson who created AlAnon for friends and family of alcoholics. And I’m especially grateful to my husband Richmond and our children Mark, Laura, and Adam who have been my greatest teachers.

I’m also grateful that I’ve been given the gifts of abundant energy, amazing good health, a sound mind, a generous heart, a simple faith, a strong work ethic, an adventurous spirit, a loving and faithful life companion, and a beloved community—both here at Newtown Friends Meeting and at Pennswood Village.

The purpose of life, as some people say, is to grow in wisdom and to learn to love more. Thank you.

COMMUNITY

There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Ask "What's possible?" not "What's wrong?" Keep asking.

Notice what you care about.

Assume that many others share your dreams.

Be brave enough to start a conversation that matters.

Talk to people you know.

Talk to people you don't know.

Talk to people you never talk to.

Be intrigued by the differences you hear.

Expect to be surprised.

Treasure curiosity more than certainty.

Invite in everybody who cares to work on what's possible.

Acknowledge that everyone is an expert about something.

Know that creative solutions come from new connections.

Remember, you don't fear people whose story you know.

Real listening always brings people closer together.

Trust that meaningful conversations can change your world.

Rely on human goodness. Stay together.

- Margaret Wheatley