

## **Faith & Life Story**

*by Lee & Asia Bennett*

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### **I. Lee:**

Asia and I were both born in 1933, and will today, in turns, try to tell something of our life stories and how being Quakers - members of the Religious Society of Friends - has helped shape our lives.

I grew up in a Quaker family. My mother was descended from line of Quakers going back in Philadelphia to prerevolutionary times. Every Sunday we got dressed up and drove 8 or 10 miles to the Lansdowne Friends meetinghouse. During the war, this was one of the few times that the car was used. The First-day School program there was like what I suppose that many Sunday school programs are: Bible stories, coloring pictures, maybe some singing, playing games, etc. Later, in high school years I had some very engaging first-day school teachers covering the Old Testament and some applications to current events in the Middle East, Europe and in America, taught by older businessmen and college professors.

I was born in Philadelphia and grew up in the western suburbs. Our modest home for the first 10 years was in a community of individual houses, probably built mostly in the first decade of the 20th century in a variety of styles and occupied by owners and renters of a wide variety of backgrounds, economic levels, national origins and religions. It was situated near the fall-line of Cobbs Creek, and from an early age I could explore the beech woods and the small dams and abandoned structures of former industrial periods along the creek.

I attended the nearby public school, preceded by a year in a Friends School kindergarten. A number of my friends in the neighborhood attended the nearby Catholic parochial school, and it was apparently a different kind of classroom.

My maternal grandmother had a small farm in the rolling hills north of Baltimore, and I often spent much of my summers exploring the countryside there, while she came to live with us during the winter.

My mother was a very intellectually able woman but, as was the custom of that time, devoted her life as a homemaker. My father was an electrical engineer working for the Westinghouse Company, selling large propulsion machinery for ships and power generation machinery for electric utilities. That afforded me the occasional opportunity to visit ships and power plants.

### **II. Asia:**

When I was six years old (and Maya, three and our brother Evan a toddler), my family moved to Haverford, Pennsylvania. A colleague of my father's found us a house to

rent next to her parents and introduced us to the little Friends elementary school and meeting. My mother's family was Southern Baptist, my father's Southern Methodist. They were essentially religious people, long away from those roots, and recognized Friends as a welcoming place for our family. Both born in 1898 in the rural South, they had to work hard and long for their educations. My mother persisted in her doctoral studies in genetics and embryology at Johns Hopkins University, finally relinquishing her ambitions for motherhood and support of my father's career. He was a marketing economist, creative, influential and eventually a distinguished professor at the University of Pennsylvania. They gave their children many opportunities that they had never had.

I started first grade in the Haverford Friends School, which offered a tender encouraging environment. We went to First Day School (Sunday school) and the family became actively involved members of the Meeting. During the war, the Meeting hosted a program welcoming refugees from Nazi-ism and helped their resettlement. A single man, then a second man and later his wife and son lived with us and others became close family friends. Their stories, and later those of a beloved Chinese couple, who were ultimately deported during the McCarthy era, shaped my understanding of the world beyond my secure and privileged life.

### **III. Lee:**

In 1944 we moved to a larger home in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, also in the western suburbs of Philadelphia. Swarthmore College was originally a Quaker college, and the town slowly grew up around it, mostly in the first half of the twentieth century. The meetinghouse was on the campus, now within easy walking distance, and the Meeting included many active, interesting members from the faculty and town.

I attended Swarthmore public schools which though small, had an excellent faculty and high academic standards... My interests in the physical sciences and mechanical arts was encouraged and developed during those years. Almost all the students were college-bound. I chose to attend relatively nearby Haverford College to study physics.

Haverford College was another Quaker liberal arts College about, 10 miles away from Swarthmore. At that time, the student population was about 400. Attendance at a midweek Meeting for Worship was compulsory. Messages shared there by both faculty and students were occasionally stimulating, sometimes humorous, but not noticeably influential in the study of physics.

The early part of my freshman year at Haverford was marked by my frequent use of the extensive Quaker library in preparing my application as a conscientious objector to war. This was during the time of the Korean War, and while my position was well documented and endorsed by well recognized members of my Friends Meeting, the local Draft Board was not inclined to recognize that position. This began a controversy lasting more than a dozen years before being only partially settled in my favor.

I was one of three physics majors in my class (all still living!). I also enjoyed taking geology classes at nearby Bryn Mawr College. After graduating from Haverford, I took a position at the Research Laboratories of the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

#### **IV. Asia:**

My high school years were spent at Westtown School, a coed Friends boarding school west of Philadelphia, founded in 1799. Early Quaker schools were founded to give both boys and girls instruction in "all things useful and necessary". In 1949, Westtown, with a large rural campus still offered courses in agriculture, had orchards and a dairy farm. During senior year, my roommate and I had great times volunteering in the dairy, washing udders and strip cupping cows. Students made applesauce in autumn and boiled down maple syrup in the spring. We all participated in a work program helping care for the dormitories and working in the dining room. We attended Meeting for Worship on Thursday and Sunday mornings, studied Bible and Quakerism, along with math, physics, biology, Latin French, German, and History and so on. We had Quaker teachers, some who as conscientious objectors had done alternative service during the war or gone to prison as resisters. My three Westtown years were essentially happy, growing times and the experience has shaped my life as a Friend in many ways.

A core Quaker conviction is that there is "that of God "in everyone and indeed in all of nature. Friends have no written creed and do not insist on the use of the word "God". There are other metaphors: the "Seed", "the Inner Light", "the Guide", the "Inward Teacher" that hint at the divine element within each person and our potential to know and do what is good. Religious pacifism arises from this understanding, so that "Friends renounce war and any use of violence between nations, groups and individuals. We strive by nonviolent means to resolve conflicts and disputes and to overcome political, social and economic injustice in our own communities and throughout the world."

At Westtown as an idealistic young person impressed by the examples of my teachers and through their teaching, I began to ponder it what it means to be a member of the Religious Society of Friends. I wanted to live up to those ideals, without having any clear understanding of how that might direct my life.

I started at Bryn Mawr College in 1951, not far from home. For freshman year, I lived on campus and then to save money, at home. Lee and I met at a freshman mixer in my dorm. We were both rather socially inexperienced young people who shared a group of college friends, several of whom had been my Westtown classmates. Discovering that we are both Quakers may have given us something to talk about at that first meeting. We quickly became a couple and married halfway through sophomore year. Our parents were distressed by our early marriage, but generously supportive. We lived in turn in our parents homes while Lee finished college. I subsequently dropped out before our first son was born. Looking back, I am moved by our parent's gracious support and truly wish that I had been more openly grateful to them. The gifts they received in return were three much loved grandchildren, all born before my father's early death at the age of 67. My mother lived long and enjoyed much loving interaction with all three sets of her grandchildren especially Maya's and ours.

The next years involved motherhood and caring for our young family while Lee worked and started graduate school. I was fortunate to have a job assisting a gifted preschool teacher in the Haverford Friends School, an apprenticeship that served me well later on.

## V. Lee:

I should probably explain that the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia during the 19th century was one of the major scientific institutions in the world. Not normally a research laboratory, but one that recognized, rewarded and published new developments in the mechanical, electrical and other scientific arts. It had a major scientific library, was a repository for all US and many foreign patents and regularly hosted a number of important scientific meetings.

By the 1920's, the Franklin Institute had outgrown its buildings in downtown Philadelphia and planned to build a major building of classical Greek architecture, occupying a full city block and prominently placed along the then developing Benjamin Franklin Parkway. It would contain not only libraries, offices and meeting halls, but also something new to America: A Science Museum. There were exhibits of real or modeled machines, sometimes moving or cut apart so that visitors could see how they worked and often accompanied by exhibits or demonstrations to explain to a general (adult) public. But 1932 was not an auspicious time to start a new building. Half the building fund had evaporated in the Depression, but about half of the original design building was completed.

During World War II, the Franklin Institute had taken on some testing and research projects and continued this after the war as a Research Laboratory. After graduating from Haverford College, I worked for four years in the solid-state physics laboratories at The Franklin Institute developing new semiconductor materials with special thermal properties. We rather neglected the museum at that time.

I also completed a Masters degree at Temple University during that time and developed an increasing interest in crystallography. In looking for a place to pursue that interest, I was again brought back to Bryn Mawr College, which has one of the great mineral collections in this country. I undertook a program there in both Geology and Physics leading to a PhD degree.

I had previously worked some summers in the physics laboratories of the Sun Oil Company and had been engaged do that again when near the end of my first year at Bryn Mawr, I received a call from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution on Cape Cod, offering me a summer internship on a cruise going to the Norwegian Sea. I had little real idea where the Norwegian Sea was or its significance at that time, but I immediately accepted. This began a new phase of my life.

My first cruise with Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) was on the RV CHAIN in the summer and fall of 1960. This involved learning a great number of new and old oceanographic measurement techniques and instrumentation. It also allowed me to meet some of the world's leading geophysicists at an international meeting in Helsinki. (1960 was the International Geophysical Year.)

My group's particular interest was looking at acoustic reflections from geological structures beneath the bottom of the ocean. Such research ultimately helped lead to radically new understandings of the way the earth's crust and mantle work. I also had the opportunity that summer to lead 10 graduate students on a study of a Norwegian fjord for a couple of weeks while CHAIN was being used for other research.

Over the next five years my time was split between Bryn Mawr and Woods Hole. We resided on Cape Cod much of that time.

I was offered a faculty position in Oceanography at University of Washington and spent the fall term of 1964 in Seattle to get to know the University and the Oceanography Department. During that time Asia and the children visited with a friend in a small farming village in central Norway.

Finishing up at Bryn Mawr and Woods Hole, we moved on to Seattle.

## **VI. Asia:**

We moved to Seattle as a family in 1966 and settled in Montlake. A fortunate introduction to The Little School, then housed at the University Unitarian Church, led us to a good educational experience for our two younger children and a job teaching three-year-olds for me. During the next five years, I finished a degree in psychology at the University of Washington and accepted additional responsibilities at The Little School.

Our family was welcomed by University Friends Meeting, and Lee and I became active in that Meeting and with the American Friends Service Committee's (AFSC) regional office, which was housed in the meetinghouse.

The Service Committee turned 100 years old this past April. Founded as the US entered the First World War to provide alternative service for conscientious objectors, the committee continued to help with relief and reconstruction, assisting refugees and then feeding a million hungry children in Germany and Austria. That effort was controversial as Germany was still viewed as the enemy deserving to be punished. Over the decades there have been many engaging stories from the Service Committee's long history of standing with people who are displaced or marginalized and of work for peace and reconciliation - as well as other controversial choices.

To mention just a few local examples: the Seattle office was founded in 1942 to both assist Japanese Americans and protest their internment. A decade later, work with Native Americans began. Advocacy for tribal fishing rights led to publication of a book, Uncommon Controversy, which was pivotal in this struggle (the Boldt Decision). In Seattle, AFSC supported establishing the United Construction Workers Association (UCWA) for workers of color in the building trades. And, in 1986 programs in Seattle and Portland offered support to gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people.

My committee roles in the late 60s led to a couple of years as program staff. When the Regional Executive Secretary left, I was chosen to fill his place, the first woman appointed long-term to head a regional office. At the time, there were 10 regional offices in the United

States and international work in Southeast Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle East as well as in Washington DC and at the United Nations. There were about 450 staff members associated with these endeavors, not counting nationals working in their own countries. And of course, every program was supported by, and accountable to, volunteer committees made up of Friends and others with particular interest or expertise. In Quaker terms, the Service Committee was – and is – a big deal. My 21 years with the AFSC, beginning here in Seattle, where the most challenging, at times exciting, and at best, deeply satisfying of my professional life. I was privileged to work with many extraordinary and devoted colleagues and to participate in much creative and effective program work.

In 1978, I was appointed as Personnel Secretary, or head of human resources, in the National AFSC office in Philadelphia. It seemed a good time to move back to be closer to Lee's father, his mother having died and my mother who was living alone in the house my parents had built on Maryland's Eastern Shore. We wound up moving into his family home in Swarthmore and my mother came to live with us. Two years later, in 1980 I became the first woman to serve as national and international Executive Secretary (now called General Secretary) of the AFSC.

My work included occasions for visiting programs in the United States and abroad which often made vivid the vitality and responsiveness of AFSC's work. Sometimes, when such visits could be coordinated with international Quaker gatherings, Lee was able to go along. Together we traveled to various interesting places: Western Kenya, Zimbabwe, Japan, China and North Korea, Mexico, Honduras and others. We represented AFSC at the Jubilee celebration of the Nobel Peace Prize in Norway. The Service Committee, along with the British Quaker Peace and Service shared the prize in 1947, for work on behalf of refugees in the two world wars. The citation reads "... from the nameless to the nameless".

## **VII. Lee:**

Back in Philadelphia, I again visited the Franklin Institute and found that the exhibits and the programs that went with them spoke to many people well beyond what I had been able to do with the University facilities. I again joined the staff of the Franklin Institute, this time in the Museum. It was quite pleasing helping people both young and old in groups and as individuals grasp either the basic science concepts or the detailed technology of modern or even relatively older machines. Much as in the Museum of Flight in Seattle, visitors were able to get onto and in some cases operate real steam and diesel locomotives, airplanes, and newer transportation and other technology.

Another endeavor of the Franklin Institute was sponsorship of school Science Fairs. I was fact quite surprised at the level of sophistication that some young students were able to exhibit in the design and execution of complex experiments. In Philadelphia, the Franklin Institute had initiated the Fairs and administered them on under the sponsorship the Philadelphia Inquirer. The Fairs had grown to involve schools in over a dozen counties in Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Delaware. They had also become national and international in participation. When the Franklin Institute and the Philadelphia Inquirer were no longer able to support them, we moved them to Drexel University, which sought the opportunity to get the attention of, and award generous scholarships to very promising science students.

Students at the national or international levels have often previously published peer-reviewed papers or been awarded patents. I often found it challenging to recruit panels of sometimes over 100 qualified judges to review such projects.

### **VIII Asia:**

On retiring from AFSC in 1992, I became the Executive Secretary for the Section of the Americas, part of an international Quaker organization, Friends World Committee for Consultation. FWCC's job is to help Quakers worldwide, in all of our diversity come to know and respect one another, and perhaps to learn from different types of Friends. Those who know liberal or unprogrammed Friends may be surprised to hear that there are many more evangelical, pastoral or programmed Friends, especially in the Mid-and Western US, Kenya, Bolivia and Peru. A Quaker historian has described the two streams as "Children of the Enlightenment" and "Children of the Second Great Awakening". (The evangelical revival movement that swept this country in the mid-19th century.) In general, unprogrammed Friends practice expectant or "silent, waiting" worship, and are without pastors. Evangelical or programmed Friends have pastors and may call their meetings "churches". During my six years with FWCC I learned to travel comfortably among and to worship with many varieties of Friends.

The extraordinary opportunities I'd have to serve my faith community, in several Friends Meetings, with AFSC and FWCC were and are of deep significance for me, offering great privilege and responsibility. My own understanding of faith has evolved over time and is well expressed in this description University Meeting offers to people who are considering membership: "We are a Religious Society of Friends within the Christian tradition, but we adhere to no theological concept about the nature of Christ and allow for a very wide range of individual convictions on this subject. Friends generally cherish the life and work of Jesus as an example of the Divine Spirit working in and for all humankind and believe that this spirit continues to live and work in us today." We are called, "to let our lives speak".

### **IX. Lee:**

In 1999 we both retired from our full-time employment and prepared to close our Swarthmore house to move to Snohomish, Washington, nearer to our children and their families. It's good to live near your children as you age!

We found a house in a peaceful setting overlooking the Snohomish River, woods, fields and mountains.

Our two grandsons were also nearby and we have greatly enjoyed them both, as they matured. We've traveled with them some, and with other good friends.

Our volunteer activities have included Quaker committee roles and work within our communities. Asia devoted time to an organization focused on women's health and wellness. I became involved in a community effort opposing an Everett-based radio station proposing a 50 kW transmission site in the Snohomish farmland.

We've done some hiking, camping, foreign and domestic travel, and enjoyed visitors during our 15 year sojourn in Snohomish.

**X. Asia:**

Then, two years ago, we came to Horizon House, and find this a congenial place to spend this part of our lives, however long that turns out to be. We enjoy being part of a learning, participatory community that speaks to our interests and experiences. I once had a bumper sticker that said "Committees Everywhere" – and that feels familiar as well. And now, our Friends Meeting is 10 minutes away rather than nearly an hour! – Or more. Best of all, we share this roof with good friends and especially our family, Maya and Fred Schulze and we have children nearby.