

An Interview with Iris Graville

by John Brantingham

Iris Graville's *Hiking Naked: A Quaker Woman's Search for Balance* is a discussion of what the modern world does to us, and how we should react to it. This world often wants to define us by our occupations, but our careers can overwhelm us and our identities often become a trap. The opening image of Iris's husband stripping off his clothes as a joke and literally walking naked becomes a controlling metaphor for the memoir. Iris strips away the trappings of her identity, leaving behind the title of nurse so that she can find out who she is and what she wants out of life in the tiny town Stehekin, Washington. She works in a bakery while she is there, but this job doesn't define who she is. In the end, she does not find a new title to call herself, but that's more or less the point. Life isn't about narrow limitations. I interviewed her by email over several weeks and our conversation ranged through several topics in her book and life.

John: One of the themes that runs through your memoir is control. At the beginning of your journey, you seemed to feel as though you were being overwhelmed by your job as a nurse, and that you sought to regain power in your own life. You never talk about this directly, but one of the things I think that runs through the book is that the real point is to let go of the need to take charge of everything. Would you agree with that?

Iris: Absolutely. I think the desire to control the worlds around us (family, work, health, etc.) is deeply ingrained in our Western culture. Many of us, especially people with privilege, believe that we can keep ourselves, our families, and our communities "safe" through our own actions—eating the "right" foods, living in the "right" neighborhood, going to the "right" schools. There's a great deal of reinforcement of those ideas through advertising, news media, entertainment, and numerous other information sources. But while it may be wise to take precautions and make sound choices, there's no guarantee that those will assure the kind of security that many of us seek.

For me, this urge to control was further heightened by significant losses in childhood (particularly my father's death when I was two) and the influence of a mother, who also had suffered a terrible loss and carried much fear about further loss. I think for both my mom and me, this need to control served some good purpose at a time when our world was turned upside down, but its persistence was not helpful for either of us. Instead, it led to an expectation of tragedy and fear and the resulting desire to stay safe. Perhaps that desire did offer some protection. I also suspect it played a part in my interest in nursing, a field that I viewed as a way to help people in need. But, that longing also drove me to avoid some of the richest parts of life—taking risks, being willing to make mistakes, and fully embracing the present moment rather than focusing on (and fearing) what might happen in the future.

John: To some degree, you seem to find the lifestyle you desire by letting go of that need for control in *Hiking Naked*, but by the end, I have the feeling of dissatisfaction. How closely do you think your reality matched what you wanted to get out of that experience?

Iris: You're right that I did, indeed, learn a great deal about both my desire to control and the futility of that endeavor—I finally grasped what an illusion control is. I also sought clarity about what I was called to if I was no longer led to nursing, and that's where you might have picked up some dissatisfaction. One of the reasons I wanted to write this book was to make sense of what those two years were all about for me, because I didn't have the kind of clarity about work at the end of my sojourn that I had hoped for.

Although I had tried to stay open to the possibility that I was being called to do something other than nursing, I recognized that I had expected that, after a two-year break from nursing, I'd be renewed and ready to return to public health nursing with the full commitment and passion I'd had previously. Or, that I'd at least have a clear picture of what my work was meant to be and that I'd go about doing it. Instead, I realized that I had more seeking to do, particularly when it came to a way to balance my commitment to health promotion and a desire for more creative pursuits that would somehow be of service. I had many doubts about my abilities as an artist and about how my art could be of any use in a world filled with suffering and injustice as well as wonder and beauty. Through writing this book, as well as lots of other study and writing, I grew easier with the seeking process and the likelihood that I might be called in other ways in the future.

John: One of the major Quaker beliefs is that silence and meditation can bring understanding. You are by no means proselytizing, but it seems to me that your attempt was to live a kind of Quaker lifestyle in which much of the time, perhaps even most of the time, was spent in silent contemplation waiting for the spirit to move you to action or understanding.

Iris: What happens for me in the silence (when I'm really grounded and open) is a sense of a direct connection with a wisdom greater than me. I talk of it as God, the Divine, or Spirit, although for me, those words seem more person-like than what I experience. I prefer to think of that wisdom as Presence. In my memoir, I wrote about one of the most profound experiences of Presence I had on "Boris' Bluff," a spot deep in the woods that was the quietest place I'd ever been. I don't always have access to such deep silence surrounding me, but I know that when I remove myself from exterior noise, I have a much better chance of turning off the interior "noise" that includes worry, fear, blame and shame, and thinking that I have to (or even can) figure everything out on my own. When I quiet THAT noise, I can tap into the wisdom that far exceeds mine. Sometimes that happens for me when I'm writing, especially first drafts, when I'm silent (except for the sound of my pen or keyboard) and I allow the writing to take me on a path of discovery.

John: Is a retreat into the natural world a necessary part of your spiritual journey?

Iris: It definitely is, particularly into the natural world of the mountains. Which is surprising to me, having lived much of my childhood and early adult years in the very flat lands of Southern Illinois and Southern Indiana (and before that, in Chicago!). I have a vivid memory of my first visit to Salt Lake City, Utah and being surrounded by the Oquirrh Range. It seemed as though I could almost reach out and touch the snow-covered peaks,

and that feeling of closeness was a comfort to me. I left there (to return to Indiana) with a clear sense, inexplicable as it was, that the mountains were my true home. It took me a few years to get back to them, but the North Cascades and the Olympics were a big draw for me to move to Seattle.

I made my first visit to Stehekin about two years after I moved to Seattle, and both my husband and I recognized it as a place that fed us spiritually. A number of scenes in my memoir recount experiences in the mountains, the woods, and along the river that helped me transcend feelings of being alone or powerless. Again, a paradox of being in the natural world, far-removed from people and having little control of the elements: that's where I feel most connected to the Divine and all beings, and where I trust most easily. I'm privileged to be able to retreat into the natural world around my home on Lopez Island and to other wild places on a regular basis because I have to practice regularly opening myself to spirit - it doesn't come naturally to me in the midst of daily life, let alone in times of chaos or strife.

John: That seems to suggest at least to some degree that the tension and strife that we feel from the outside world is manufactured by our own imaginations. That is not to say that bad things don't happen but that we amplify them and taking ourselves out of situations where we do that is a spiritually wise practice.

Iris: Yes, I'm quite capable of, as you say, manufacturing tension and strife. Some of that goes back to fear and the desire to control that I mentioned earlier. And although I value my sense of compassion for people and the world around me, I can feel quite burdened by their needs and my desire to ease pain and suffering. Retreating outdoors offers me so much evidence that I'm not in charge, and at the same time that everything is connected. Keeping that awareness with me in daily life gives me hope and strength to face both the real and the imagined distress and to recognize and cherish all I feel grateful for.

John Brantingham is the Poet Laureate of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Park, where he teaches poetry and fiction. His work has been featured on Garrison Keillor's Writer's Almanac and in The Best Small Fictions 2016. He has published seven books of poetry and fiction, and is currently working on a collection of flash fiction pieces covering the history of California.