

Courageous Steps

by Maren Sinclair Hurn

My mother, Clare Sinclair, chose to stop eating and drinking and died nine days later at the age of 92. In mid February 2013, a major stroke left her severely paralyzed on one side. Four daughters came from around the country to be in Maryland to visit in the hospital with their mother. Clare learned to swallow liquids and could be discharged from the hospital to begin rehabilitation. She first communicated her desire to live, with the statement "I will eat ice cream!" The next morning she communicated her change of heart, refusing food or water or any measures to prolong her life. Her whole life led up to this courageous step.

Clare was born May 2, 1920 in Cranbrook, British Columbia to Scottish immigrant parents, Clara and John Sinclair, a Presbyterian minister. She reflected in her memoir "it was through the loving security of my childhood that I learned **trust, optimism** and **courage**." **Deep feelings, a keen sense of adventure, and stubbornness** also informed her life.

I can imagine Clare just loving being a part of her 1935 Kansas high school basketball team. In 1936 the team was cut because the school administrator was concerned that the game was injuring the players' uterus! This was not her first opportunity to question authority. At a much earlier age she **stubbornly** refused to kneel to pray at her bedside, knowing she had a direct connection with Spirit anywhere. Furthermore, sermons and rote prayers seemed unnecessary. In 1942 she found silent Friends in Lawrence, Kansas!

Her **deep feelings** included shared compassion and a natural desire to connect with strangers, family, and friends. As for lives she touched most, she remembered a train ride in the Middle East with a Palestinian woman preschool teacher. Though they shared no language, she and the fellow passenger shared the mutual joy of hand lotion!

Optimistic as ever, in the spring of 2000, Clare, as a representative to the Montana Abolition Coalition and with a friend from Dillon, Eve Malo, visited small and rural towns in conservative Montana to raise awareness of the death penalty. These two women in their 80's traveled the state for 46 days in a pick-up truck, sleeping in a sheepherder's wagon. Toward the tail end of the trip, the Lincoln, Montana librarian invited them to give their presentation in her facility. This woman had been there when the Unibomber, Ted Kazinski, who lived in rural Lincoln, had often used the library and she found him a most intelligent and interesting person and very good with the little children. She said she was not sure how she felt about the death penalty but after knowing him and his goodness and now his dark side, she still was his friend. That evening she came to the place of her own honesty about this man and signed the petition (to remove the death penalty.)

In her own family, Clare assured the first time new mother, her daughter (overwhelmed with the responsibility of caring for a helpless newborn), "Oh sweetheart, **trust** life to life." And so she did.

Courage she did have and Clare learned to ask for help. In 1971, after 29 years of marriage and being unaware of her husband's affair, Clare survived, with support, a devastating

divorce. Quakers far and wide were there for her: Elizabeth (Israel) Jones of PYM took the Greyhound from southern California to support her. Norma Price from her home monthly meeting in Phoenix was a constant. She wrote in her memoir "As Way Opens," One day as I was driving from Flagstaff to Phoenix, I was overcome with the desire to destroy myself. I thought if only I could hit a stone wall and end it all. But the Spirit did not forsake me. My eyes caught sight of a patch of dry grass by the side of the road. It glowed golden in the evening light. Somehow, again the beauty of nature, even the dead, dry grass brought a glimmer of hope. For months I held on to that glimmer." She gradually felt again the buoyancy of the "Great Ocean" and could add the name "hope" to that spiritual entity. In new humility, she prayed for guidance. A year later she stepped into the unknown and joined the Olney Friends School staff in Barnesville, Ohio. (2 years)

One thing led to another and she accepted a 4-year assignment with the AFSC in the war torn Gaza strip. She prepared her family, "If anything happens to me, I have had a great life, don't worry." In this way, she began to prepare us for her decision some 30 years later. Less dangerous assignments followed including two years in Kenya with the British Friends and as the Brinton Memorial Visitor on the West Coast.

Working with the FWCC, traveling and visiting programmed and un-programmed Quakers in the west she found to be the most challenging job of her life. In her memoir, she wrote of this struggle. "I felt I had no prejudices and yet when I was asked if Richard Nixon was a Quaker I was quick to reply that he was certainly not my kind of Quaker. In the struggle of my own heart and the difficulty of dialogue I was pressed into a new humility and longed for guidance. I found help in the words of John Woolman: *'Love being the first motion, I felt a concern to visit the Indians that I might learn from them and perhaps they from me'*. I knew that for me, love must be the first motion. I longed for that motion. Gradually it came as I opened my heart and learned to listen, not only to the words but to the place where the words came from."

Clare continues, "It was not until I visited Alaska Yearly Meeting in 1986, however that I truly felt that motion with no strings attached. This Yearly Meeting, made up of about 1800 Inuit people living above the Arctic Circle, in not only evangelical but Pentecostal. These Friends prayed out loud, and all at the same time. I was startled. Gradually as I listened to the words of individuals praying for loved ones, the noise began to sound like ocean waves, rising and falling until it faded away. Cleansed and restored, Friends sang with hearts as well as voices. When they were singing 'Amazing Grace' tears flowed. My mind slipped back to a Meeting for Worship in Palo Alto. It was the Sunday after Ronald Reagan was reelected. A heaviness hung over the meeting. Silence was broken with Joan Baez singing 'Amazing Grace.' Tears flowed. Yes, amazing grace had been experienced in both the highly vocal and emotional Pentecostal meeting at Kotzebue as well as in the silent, unprogrammed meeting in Palo Alto."

Much later in one of her choices in particular, Clare's misplaced trust?.... adventuresome spirit?.... naivety?... denial?..... blinded her to reality. Her friends in Montana where she had settled questioned Clare's sudden relocation across the Atlantic. A bit **stubborn**, now in her late 70's, she sold her pick-up, gave away her earthly belongings and flew to Scotland to be with a person whom she believed to be her true love. Unfortunately the woman had a

different, and darker idea of relationship and tried to control Clare. A competent therapist helped Clare grasp the situation and form an escape plan: She flew back to the US with only the clothes on her back, her meds, purse, and passport. This is yet another example of Clare asking for and receiving help and using **courageous** action to change her circumstances.

In 2001 Clare chose to live in a tiny HUD subsidized studio apartment at Friends House, in Sandy Springs, Maryland. Death was natural occurrence in the retirement community. Conversations about quality of life, mobility issues and forgetfulness were commonplace.

There Clare was part of an end of life discussion group. The group learned about an older couple who died after they chose to stop eating. Clare's comment, interestingly enough, was that she didn't think that she had that kind of **courage**. She often expressed that she did not want to live "upstairs" (skilled nursing and memory unit at Friend's House) adding she didn't want to be told how and when to do most anything, including end of life. She was grateful for her very fulfilling long life. Her mind was sharp, her body was slowing down and in her 90's she was tired.

Clare lived independently until the day of her stroke. Her doctor had been part of earlier end of life consultations and was supportive when the IV that brought sustenance to Clare was removed. Clare never once lost her resolve. She was moved from the hospital to a room in the nursing division of Friends House. Her daughters were able to stay in FH to visit and be near to her. Hospice told them that their mother's choice of refusing nourishment was not adding to her discomfort. Clare only accepted morphine to manage pain after being assured it would not extend her life even for one second.

Mama gave us "Hurn girls" many gifts: between birthing us, and this opportunity to be intimately involved in her end of life, the icing on the cake was just being together with her and with each other for several weeks (the longest time in 47 years!). Clare was so clear and determined. She died peacefully with loving medical staff and family caring for her. For her daughters there was no script. Hospice gave us some pointers. With Clare, we had to be continually present and notice what worked, what didn't and to listen with our hearts. There were plenty of ups and downs in the process. We got to say good-bye over days and to watch her body change physically as she slowly retreated inward. But even in the last hours of her life, with my sister Jane present, she was able to make her physical needs known. She looked at some greeting cards and turned them face down. She smiled at the tapestry weaving that she had made "Abraham Searching the Night Sky." Several times her working hand reached out and retreated from my sister's resting hand before she took her last breath.

She was able to say good-bye and was ready to die.

Curiously, Maren Sinclair Hurn just recently became a member of Santa Cruz Monthly Meeting (PYM) after actively participating in the meeting for over thirty years. Now retired, she plays cello and sings in a little band that performs in skilled nursing facilities and retirement homes. Maren also supports her life-long love of making things by having a space at the Tannery Art Center in Santa Cruz.