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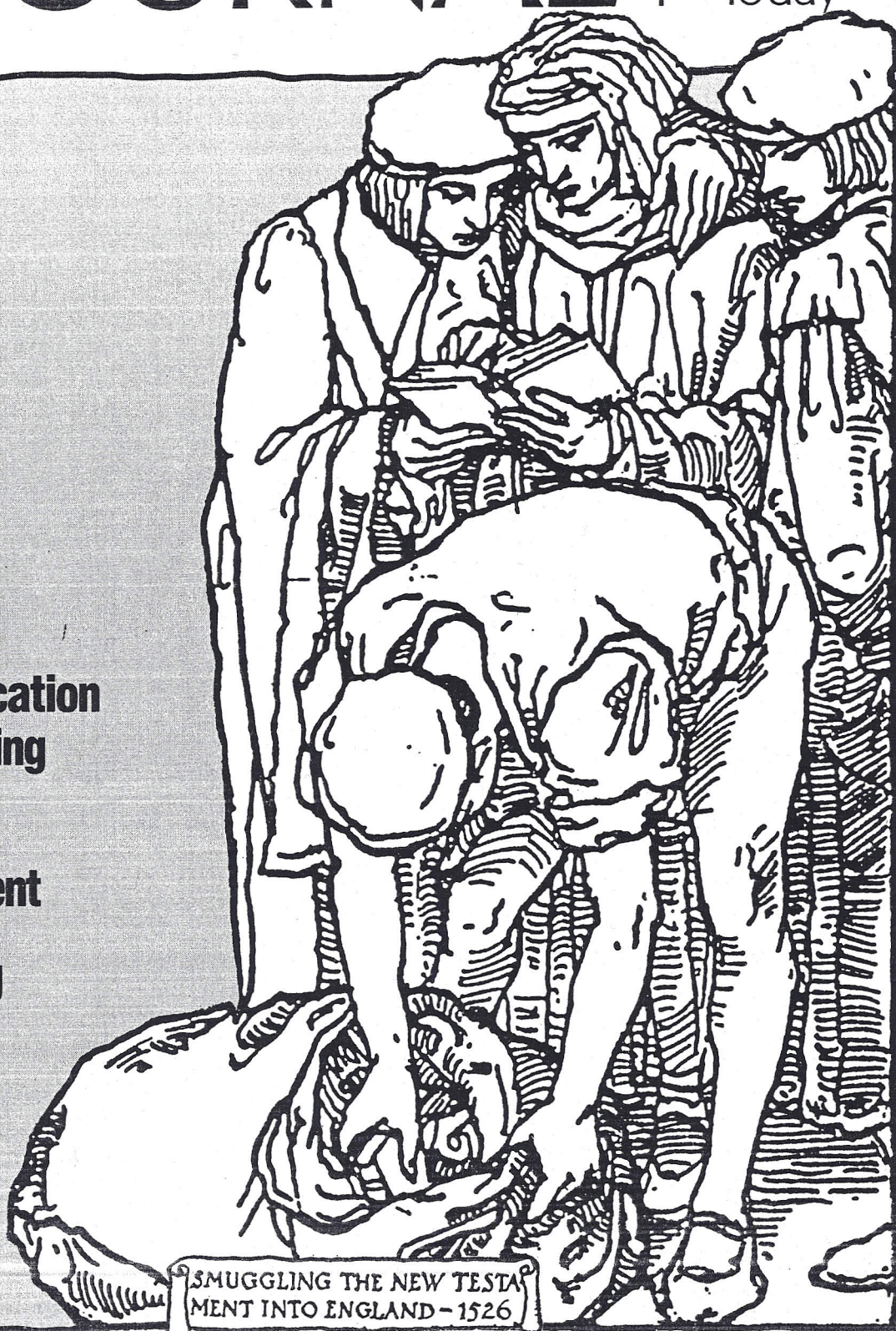
Quaker
Thought
and
Life
Today

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**Drawn to the
Quiet**

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**Bible Study:
From Detoxification
to God-wrestling**

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**Call to
Re-enchantment**

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Wave-Walking



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Wave-Walking

Listening to her, I realized I was learning
how to grow old.

by Margaret R. Yocom

I had been trying to decide all that early November weekend in 1988 whether or not to make the trip from Virginia to my hometown in Pennsylvania. I was bone tired, but I wanted to be with my only niece on this her first birthday. And if I left by noon, I could see my grandmother along the way.

Bertha Davidheiser Yocom—"Nanna" to my brother, sisters, cousins, and me—lived in a nursing home in Quarryville, just over the Maryland border in the Pennsylvania German country. She grew up in the farmland of southeastern Pennsylvania, her father a wheelwright and farmer who leased one farm after another; her mother followed after. Bertha became a bookkeeper after a treasured teacher of hers warned her against teaching. So she went to "the City"—Philadelphia—and returned home when it was time. She married a farmer. "There were others," she whispered to me once. She always whispered when she had something important to say to a listener's ears only. "Yes, others, even a minister. But I'd rather have a good, honest, Christian farmer than a mediocre anything else." And she did. She and Isaac raised their children—my father, aunts, and uncle—on the farm that had been in the Yoder-Yocom family since William Penn's sons, Thomas and

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Photo by Kenneth P. Miller

Richard, sold it to them on the 21st of June, 1749. Now, in this her 100th year, Bertha was still in that farm country.

Her earth was a bright, abundant place, filled with mystery. Bertha led me along the creek by torrents of violets and daffodils. In her ample kitchen, we mixed rhubarb and strawberries into pies and squeezed lemons and oranges into lemonade. Up in her attic, amidst her belongings, my cousins, brother, sister, and I held meetings of the ghost club and scribbled in witches' writing on the rafters. And sleeping in her upstairs front room was like sleeping in a castle tower, watching the gauzy white curtains float in and out, in and out with the breeze. There were cows to call, trees to climb, woods to walk in, roses to smell, and rows and rows of corn to walk through.

Her earth was also alive with the world of the Spirit. She had often sent me copies of *Daily Remembrances*, small pastel-colored paperbacks filled with prayers for each day of the month. And many a letter of hers would end with one of her favorite little poems of faith. Sometimes handwritten, sometimes typed, each poem began with a boldly marked title, but few ever carried the name of the author. She sent *You Are Not Alone* to me twice:

*There have to be those times in life,
When you are "on your own,"
But you may always rest assured
That you are not alone. . . .
For God is ever at your side
With all his loving care.*

*If only you have faith in Him,
As millions of others do,
The God of heaven and of earth
Who gave your life to you.
He made you, and He loves you, and
He is your dearest friend,
Today, tonight, tomorrow and
Forever without end.
However low you may feel,
You never are alone,
God is always with you and
He wants you for His own.*

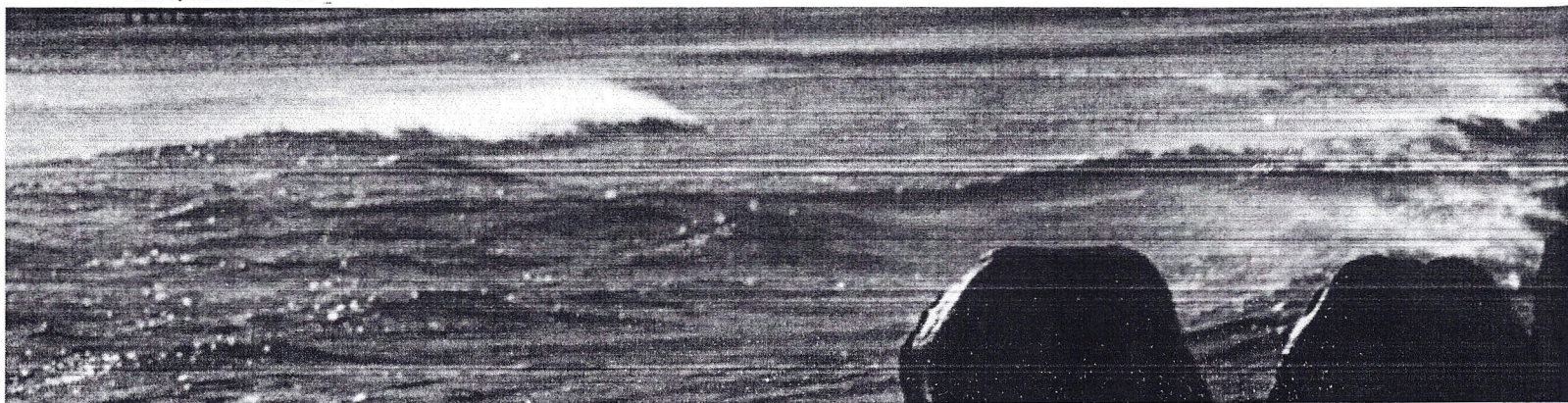
For years, though, I paid little attention; I had not been ready to receive her messages. But when I came to Quakerism, she was the first I told. I rejoiced in her; her life and her words had helped me find the way. I was more than a bit nervous as I explained to her what I understood Quakerism to be. Bertha, after all, had watched me grow up in the Lutheran faith our family had followed for generations. But she paused and said, "It sounds like you have found a good home."

She was always wondering what heaven would be like. "Peggy!" she'd yell with heated conviction, "I don't think we'll just all be there sitting quietly, and singing hymns, do you?" Yet, in my experience of her, I think heaven was always close to her, that she was often in touch with the Spirit that moves in mysterious, miraculous ways through our lives.

Once about two years ago, we were talking about death and heaven, when she abruptly stopped, looked straight at me, and said, one word firmly planted after the other: "Peggy, this next time when I go to die, don't you call me back. You hear? Don't call me back." I sat speechless. When she had been near death in 1985, I had flown from my workplace in Alaska to see her. I had not been ready to part with her then. I had no spiritual home, either. Had I, in my want of her, called her back?

Had others of us? How closely linked are we to the ones we love through God?

As I drove through northern Virginia that November morning, I thought back



to my last visit a month or two before. She had called me either "Gladys" or "Edie," "Susan" or Kathy"—my aunts and cousins. Then she'd remember, "Oh, it's *you*, Peggy!" She'd sling her words about, exasperated with herself. She liked to get things right. "It's like a wave," she explained. "My mind seems to come and go. I'll be talking with you and then it will just lead me away, and then I come back again, like waking up and, well, I know I've been gone. It's so confusing." Listening to her, I realized I was learning how to grow old.

Continuing on, driving around the Washington beltway toward Baltimore, I remembered what several relatives told me about their latest visits with her. "She's not talking quite right," they said. "She might not know you if you visit." But as the half-hours slipped by, the urge grew stronger, and I knew when I turned off Interstate Route 95 onto Route 222, 32 miles north of Baltimore, I was headed for Quarryville and Nanna.

As I walked into her room that sunlit November day and woke her from her nap, she turned slowly and smiled, "Oh, it's you, Peggy. Oh, good." With words that could have been taken for a request, she put forth a command: "Let's go out and sit in the light." Warmed with the pleasure that well-worn recognition brings, I smiled at this tone of voice I had heard so often.

We went to the end of the hallway and sat by the windows. As we talked, her mind traveled along those same waves as before. Sometimes she was with me, sometimes with someone else. "Look," she interrupted my reverie. "Look at that bright light out there." She pointed to a spot near the far edge of the leaf-browned lawn.

"Is it sunlight?" I asked.

"No, can't you see it?"

I couldn't.

When we returned to her room, just as we walked through the doorway, she pointed to the corner of the far wall. "Oh, look at that apple tree, how beau-

tiful it is. Oh my."

"What do you see?" I asked, excited. She had taken a step into a world I couldn't see.

"Oh, apples! So many beautiful red apples."

Later, right before I left, she whispered, "My mother's been to see me. Isaac, too." I smiled toward the warmth and joy in her voice. I did not puzzle over what was happening; I was content in the peace of her visions. One thing I knew. These were not words from someone whose mind was not quite right; they were gifts, the words of a wave-walker.

I drove home to Pottstown through one of the most rosy sunset glows I had ever seen. And in that soft light, my thoughts turned to her. I laughed as I re-visited one of my favorite stories about her. Once when her eldest son David was sick, he didn't get well and he didn't get well, so she poured all the medicine the doctor had given her right down the toilet. "There!" she exclaimed. "That's where *that* belongs. I'll treat him myself." And she did.

And no matter what was happening in her life, when I'd ask her how she was, she always said something positive. Recently, she had told me with a smile, "Well, Peggy. I'm fine *inwardly*. Inwardly, you know. Especially these last two days. But outwardly! Oh, this *body*!" Her way of looking at the world always reminded me of the sunshine and shadow quilts I'd seen fluttering on farmstead washlines as I traveled to see her.

I thought back to one time when we

were talking in her daughter Gladys's back yard under the white birch, and Bertha said, "Of all the things in the world, I really do like trees. See how strong they are, how straight. And yet, when a big wind comes, you know how they bend? I'd like to be like a tree."

And to me, she was. Strong, yet able to bend in the big wind.

Later I was to learn that as I was traveling to Pottstown, Bertha was traveling, too.

I left her at 3:30. About a half hour later she asked a nurse to take down the railing on her bed. She called out to her roommate, laughing, "I'm going on an excursion, Linda. Do you want to come along?"

Linda said no.

So Bertha slipped off the bed—some say she was trying to get into her wheelchair—and fell to the floor, breaking her hip. When the doctor told her they'd be taking her to the hospital, she spoke a final truth: "No. I don't want to go there." At that moment, a heart attack swept her away.

I think of the apple tree and the light often. I am glad the Spirit brought her pictures of beauty and of loving people to guide her home. And I trust that now Bertha knows what heaven is.

I dreamed about her the other month. She was on a bus, a long bus, way in the back. Her face was filled out, her head awash with silver curls. She wore her turquoise-blue dress. She was laughing and talking with other older folks, pointing out the windows. I quickly climbed the rest of the stairs and grabbed the railing, ready to round the corner seat and dash down the aisle of the bus to greet her, when my eyes met those of the bus driver, and I stopped. Silently, slowly, he turned his head and laid the tips of his fingers on the clear glass wall just behind his seat, which blocked all entry to the back of the bus. I looked at Bertha one more time. She couldn't see me, but she was talking and laughing still. I walked slowly down the steps and then out onto the road beyond. □

Bertha
Davidheiser
Yocom

