

Walking the Labyrinth

Ashley M. Wilcox October 1, 2011

“This is the message we have heard and declare to you: God is light; in God there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with God and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as God is in the light, we have fellowship with one another ...”
I John 1:5-7.

I find walking labyrinths comforting. I begin by standing at the entrance and setting an intention, and then I go. Even when it seems like I am going the wrong way, I know that I am on the path that will lead me to the center. As the sign by the labyrinth at Ben Lomond Quaker Center reminds visitors, there is no wrong way to walk a labyrinth. I sometimes stomp my way through. When I reach the center, I often cry, releasing the emotion of whatever it was that brought me there. I sit and spend time holding my intention in prayer. Then, eventually I stand up and walk back through the labyrinth and out into the world.

The world outside of the labyrinth seems much more complicated. As a woman who is called to ministry, I sometimes feel like a mess of contradictions. I am small and soft-spoken, but I often feel led to give strong, prophetic vocal ministry. I am afraid of everything, but I jump into things with both feet. Biblical language is my first religious language, but I am easily upset by gendered language about God. I am attracted to both men and women, but I feel clear that, at least for now, God is asking me to be celibate. I am a homebody who craves local community, but I have felt a clear call to traveling ministry. As an introvert, I find people draining, but I love them fiercely. And my primary relationship is with a vast and personal God, but I spend a lot of time angrily fighting with God.

When I am feeling overwhelmed by these contradictions, it is helpful for me to remember who I am. My name is Ashley Marie Wilcox. I am 29 years old. I have lived in the Pacific Northwest nearly my entire life. I am a member of Freedom Friends Church of the Religious Society of Friends. I am a beloved child of God.

Over the past three years, I have spent a lot of time traveling in the ministry among Friends, primarily in the Pacific Northwest. At the same time, I have participated in the School of the Spirit program “On Being a Spiritual Nurturer,” a two-year program, with residencies four times a year at a retreat center in Durham, North Carolina. Between the two, I have traveled a lot. At times, I just kept a suitcase out, ready for my next trip.

I think that from the outside, all this travel seems glamorous and exciting. I can get caught up in other people’s excitement as they ask me where I am going next. And it is exciting. More than that, it has felt deeply right. It is different from anything else I have done. Although there is usually some reason for my visit, I know that’s not really why I am there. Traveling ministry is an exercise in listening to God and to others, trying to be faithful in responding to whatever happens.

At times when I am traveling, I feel like I am an excuse for others to do things that they want to do—to talk about their experiences of God, in whatever language they use for God, or to get together with people they want to see. The time I spend traveling in the ministry feels out of time—the hours seem longer and I lose track of the days. It is intense and amazing, and strange and miraculous things happen and seem ordinary.

But traveling in the ministry is also hard and can be very draining. As my friend and traveling companion Sarah Peterson once said, “Travel in the ministry is eight-tenths drudgery and twotenths spiritual stuff.” To others, it may seem like I just appear at their meeting on a Sunday; they may not see all of the work and care that went into getting there. For me, the traveling ministry usually begins months before the actual trip. I feel led to visit a particular place, and I spend time in prayer about that leading. I meet with my care committee and talk with Friends from my meeting about my sense of leading. When I feel clear, I get in touch with someone from the meeting or church to talk about whether it feels right to Friends there and what they might expect me to do during my visit. I prefer to visit Friends in a spirit of openness, to spend time in worship with them and see what arises. I also find that shared meals are a good time to learn how Truth prospers among them. Sometimes Friends want a prepared message or a more formal workshop. It is important for me to know what is expected in advance.

As the time approaches, there are a lot of logistical details to work out. Because I do not have a car, transportation is always an issue for me. Over the past few years, I have traveled by train, airplane, boat, bus, and rental car to get to meetings and churches. I have been

blessed with grant money for these trips, without which they would not have been possible. I have slept in a lot of different beds and eaten breakfast with many Friends, and I have found that breakfast is a time when people are quite open and generous.

Coming home is even harder. After giving ministry, I am tired and tender and I need time to process and decompress. But much of the ministry takes place on Sunday, and I have a full-time job where I am expected to be on Monday. Those are hard things to balance and I have tried to do so in various ways: by taking sick leave the day after ministry (which always makes me feel guilty), by cutting back on traveling ministry, and once, by quitting my job so that I could be released for ministry for the summer. I have not found a perfect solution. Coming home is also hard because I have experienced so much in a short time. It is disorienting to come back to life the way it was before when I feel so different, and I don't always have words to describe what has happened or how I feel I have changed.

In the middle of all of this, I felt led to move from Seattle, Washington, to Salem, Oregon, to become clerk of my meeting, Freedom Friends Church. Becoming clerk was a hard transition for me. Freedom Friends Church is a small and young meeting. I have been attending since 2004, a few months after the meeting started, and I became a member in 2005. The day that I became a member, our membership grew from three to six. Now we have over 20 members. Before I became clerk, there had only been one previous clerk, Alivia Biko, one of the founders of the meeting. I felt intimidated stepping into her shoes and inadequate for the job.

Even though the meeting is small and young, it has had an impact on Quakerism that belies its size. Freedom Friends is famous or infamous, depending on who you ask. This is partially because it is both explicitly Christ-centered and inclusive, which is unusual for a Friends meeting in this part of the world. We also have a surprising number of people who write Quaker blogs and travel in the ministry, and we have written and approved our own Faith and Practice, which has spoken to people far and wide.

It has been disorienting for me to go back and forth between public ministry and being at home at Freedom Friends, because I feel like the reputation my meeting has is very different from its reality. The truth is that most of the people who come to Freedom Friends have no idea that the church is famous. Week to week, it is a church that struggles. We struggle to pay our rent, and a high number of members struggle with mental illness and physical disabilities. For many, it is a victory just to make it through the door on Sunday. But

it is a place where God's love is tangible, in worship and in the ways we love each other.

One evening at a School of the Spirit residency, I found that I had an hour of free time. That was surprising because the days at the residencies are very full. I felt drawn to the retreat center's labyrinth. When I got there, I was alone. It was a cool November evening and the moon was out. I was struggling with the idea of becoming clerk of Freedom Friends, and I set my relationship with my meeting as my intention for walking the labyrinth.

As I began to walk, I noticed that I had two shadows: one long shadow, cast by the lights coming out of a nearby building, and another, more solid, short shadow, cast by the moon. When I turned in one direction, I could see one shadow, and turning in the other direction, I saw the other. Seeing these two shadows seemed to reflect the differences between how others see me versus how I see myself, and how others see my meeting versus how it sees itself. Reaching the center, I sat and spent time in prayer. After a while, I felt like I could see steps forward for myself and for my meeting. I stood to leave, following my shadows back out of the labyrinth and into the world.

Recently, I have had the sense that the shape of my ministry is changing. I am feeling called to lay down traveling ministry and spend more time at home with my meeting. This is really hard for me because I love traveling ministry. I have never felt so alive as I have when traveling among Friends. It is also hard because I am realizing how much being a traveling minister has become a part of my identity. But I know that whether I travel or not, I am still a minister and a beloved child of God.

Laying down traveling ministry feels a little like walking out of the labyrinth and into the wilderness. As hard as traveling ministry can be at times, at least it is familiar. And in addition to laying down traveling ministry, the School of the Spirit program is ending. I am in a liminal space again, unsure of what will come next. But even when I feel afraid of the changes, I am convinced that nothing, not life nor death, nor language nor theology, nor men nor angels, can separate me from the love of God. I know that God uses everything, especially the hard things. And when I keep my focus on God, my entire life feels like a labyrinth: although I may sometimes feel like I am walking in the wrong direction, I am always on the path to the center.

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