

“Weaving the Fabric of Our Lives - the Warp and Weft of it All”
(Valerie Wood-Lewis)

All of the crossroads in my life have been about striving for and making connections with others. In reflecting on the moments of inspiration and crisis that have changed the fabric of my life, I marvel at the blend of serendipity, hard work, luck and crystal-clear intention that got me to where I am today -enmeshed in an interdependent web of relationships that enhance my life with their beauty, courage, challenge, love!

I look back into my childhood and can see glimpses of my longing to be truly connected to others, though this longing went largely unmet. I never quite fit into my own family. For Mom, I was too much. Too emotional. Too outspoken, too sensitive. For Dad, not enough. Not hardworking enough. Not outdoorsy or fit enough. I never felt I could truly be myself *and* belong. I tried to find a place for the real me. Neither my father nor my mother particularly valued extended family, so contact was very limited and superficial. My parents were divorced, Dad lived in the mountains, with no neighbors, no phone – picture Grizzly Adams. Mom tended to live in suburbs, where we drove everywhere and lived as an isolated unit. We didn’t belong to a church, we moved and changed schools a lot.

I always knew how it could be though, and had hope. I dreamed, read, wrote in my journals. All along I was percolating, just waiting in some ways, for a place where my spirit might soar and there, strong and free, meet other like-minded, like-hearted spirits. In college, trying to belong, I experimented for the first time with alcohol and with dating, but I felt more alone than ever. So I put my head down and worked, on a double major with a full time job to support it. Seeds were being planted, though. I took a spring break trip to Cancun, and discovered something magical about Latin America that would come to bear fruit for me later. And, seeking something more in my senior year, I visited a few churches to see what they were all about, having never stepped foot in one until a recent wedding. When I chanced into a Unitarian one, I remember feeling I’d been a UU all along and not known it. I felt truly at home.

This was a saving grace when I moved to NYC, not knowing a soul, living in Times Square above the “McDonalds of Sex!” I found All Souls UU and attended under the dynamic leadership and preaching of John Beuhrens and Forrest Church and my soul just exploded onto the scene. I attended Wednesday and Sunday services, led lay services and retreats, worked in their soup kitchen and on service projects, participated in and then led the curriculum BYOT. The active Young Adult Group became my social circle. I read and wrote more about spiritual concerns, volunteered more, found my passion for teaching through tutoring homeless children, and *finally* felt truly known and accepted by a community.

So many of the things integral to my current identity began during this period. I became vegetarian, became more politically aware, biked for transportation... I was becoming myself. Finding my voice. Speaking out loud.

I traveled again to Latin America to answer the pull after my first, more tourist-oriented sojourn. I felt deeply at home there in my desire for connection. My enthusiasm and strong emotions were more culturally correct, my tendency toward physical affection more commonplace, my colorful language the norm. I went on to travel widely throughout Latin America over the next decade, always alone so that I would more directly be in connection with the people there, always for extended periods of time so I could immerse myself. This tapestry, from a trip to Guatemala, symbolizes the vibrancy of my time there.

I began to come into my own. I wasn't reinventing myself so much as coming alive.

When I got back home, I began seeking out extended family, and built new adult connections with them. I took the time to visit, write letters, and call.

I also followed my passion for teaching, which is all about relationships and connections. I visited families at home, took students on outings into the Washington, D.C. community, fostered relationships with local agencies and businesses to support my classroom. As first the only white person in an all Black school, and then a gringa at a bilingual Spanish elementary school, my interest in intercultural concerns continued.

For someone so wanting to belong, I was finding I could in a variety of settings. I was taking risks, and make no mistake, I made myself vulnerable and was hurt along the way.

But I began to see that the more I was able to be myself, the more I drew people to me who shared similar beliefs, hopes, dreams – people for whom I was not too much, people for whom I was not too little. And then, at a critical mass protest ride, I met the man of my dreams! Michael, my true love, my best friend. With Michael, I could be myself and he *loved* me for it. I proposed to him within a month! He likes to say that it took him six months to work up a counter offer! The truth is though, he had a very different, more rooted past, with parents married for 45 years at that point, compared to my record of three divorces plus. He knew what it meant – as a witness anyway - to be in connection for a lifetime and he wanted to be sure we were both ready for that.

We threw out all the conventions and built our wedding from scratch, with friends providing the music, us providing the words, all of us making the food and setting up the party on our friends' land. This wedding quilt completed by me from scraps begun by my grandmother is a testament to our desire to connect to the past and to family.

Shortly after our ceremony, my Dad was diagnosed with late-stage stomach cancer. I dropped everything to strengthen our bond before it was too late. When I told him I wanted to make sure we had a clean slate, hoping he'd apologize for some of my pain, he forgave *me*! I learned to laugh instead of cry, and cared for him intimately, with my sisters, honored to accompany him in his final days. While our relationship had been troubled, my father was an incredible inspiration to me. One of the turning points of my

life was helping him, at his request, to hasten his death as the end drew nearer, and the bond created with his best friend and my sisters through this experience is unbreakable.

Michael and I then consciously undertook a search for a place to raise a family of our own, a place to settle down. We looked at co housing and tight knit communities across the US, settling on Burlington as a place we, again, felt at home. We weren't swimming upstream by wanting to join a CSA, or bike to work, or use alternative currency, or check out tools from the library. Michael started the Front Porch Forum in our Five Sisters neighborhood, I started a dinner sharing group, we went in on large purchases with neighbors and so on. The trust level in the neighborhood has grown so that we don't just borrow a cup of sugar from one another, we lend each other our homes for visiting relatives, we discipline each other's children, we share errands, rarely exchanging money because "it all evens out in the end." Again, these deep relationships don't come without cost – they require a commitment of time and energy, honest communication and mutual respect. They demand emotional risk.

I think one of the greatest emotional risks Michael and I have taken is with the birth families of our children, and it reasons that these relationships are also some of the most wholehearted and complex connections in our lives. I made this baby quilt during the time we were working to start our family, tying in colors from the wedding quilt. While Michael and I both had experience with adoption in our own families, and excitement about that route of starting our family, I don't think either of us understood the intensity, trust and love involved in such an intimate relationship. We deeply love our children's birth families and have unswerving gratitude and respect for their strength and caring in making adoption plans and in literally placing their children in our arms to raise and adore. The experience has upped the ante on my appreciation for life, birth, parenting, and what it really means to love. There's not a day that goes by that I'm not grateful for getting to be Madeline and Ben's mother. And I pray for their birthmothers, in particular, loving their children from afar, grieving, and perhaps having a family of their own some day. We treasure our ongoing bond with all these souls, and our family can only be enriched by there being more people in the world who love our beautiful children!

Likewise, our homebirths highlighted the ties that bind us together with our community, too. Both births were very hard and long, but I was surrounded by family, friends, neighbors, trick or treaters in Henry's case, and midwives. I never felt alone or scared. I marvel at the neighbors who waved from the sidewalk and took children into their care, the church members who brought food, the friends who stopped by during labor and went home to write poems about it, Michael and the friends who talked and sang me through the hardest parts, and caregivers who with reverence, helped me bring two beautiful, big-headed boys into the world.

Of our children, Ben, especially, has brought amazing connections into our lives. Through his need, they come to us, as nurses, therapists, teachers and helpers. Through his personality, they are reeled in and stay linked, becoming like friends and family to all 6 of us. Though we sometimes bemoan our lack of privacy and the sheer

number of people coming through our home, in the end we are so enriched by these incredible individuals. They tend to be people who see the God in all of us, who listen carefully and well, who judge less and love more. And it goes without saying that we couldn't have the marvelous life we do and provide the enriching opportunities for Ben that we do, without them. Benjamin has certainly taught me to be connected by accepting help, and further by asking for it!

I remember the first time I accepted help – it came from nowhere and I said yes out of desperation. Ben hadn't slept for 36 hours and just cried and cried. Someone I met at the cerebral palsy group we started happened to call and could hear his distress. She said she would be right over and hung up. This is someone I had met only twice! But she had a son with CP, too, and heard in my voice that I was out of steam. She called back immediately, saying on second thought, she was bringing him to her home so I could have some quiet to rest. She did, and he slept, and she's one of my best friends in the world now.

Equally, I'll never forget the first time I asked for help. I was in over my head and called a neighbor for a favor. She said no. I was so hurt, and shared that I was really working on learning to ask for help. She informed me that she was really working on learning to say no and set limits! And we picked each other to practice on! That experience aside, I have learned that people want to help, as I know I do. It deepens connections and creates bonds. And we all pay it forward, creating more and stronger threads in the web.

One way that Michael and I have strengthened the bonds of community is, ironically, by taking time for ourselves as a couple. By allowing our children to be cared for by other adults in our community, they learn to be connected to, to trust, and to love a whole community of people. At the same time we are able to strengthen the foundation of our marriage, of our family. Our own Pam McPherson has become a very special "aunt" to my children, a role all the more appreciated by us since our immediate family lives far away. This doesn't just buy us some free time, it builds community for us and for her.

As for parenting in general, my daily goal is to be in deep connection with each of my kids, to truly listen to their hearts, to meet them where they are, to give them strategies to be in healthy relationships with each other and the world. It is meaningful work to be their primary teacher – for now - in the ways of love and kindness.

What a change – the first 20 years of my life rich in experience, but lonely in many ways; this second twenty so very, very full. I knew what I wanted, a life and a home full of people I felt close to. So I've prioritized relationships in my daily life. I feel so much more centered, interconnected, and secure. It's messy, it's imperfect, it's complex, it's *hard work* to be truly connected to and dependent on people, and to be depended upon. It's worth it. This is the most important, spiritually demanding and rewarding work.

Thank you for helping me take another emotional risk, sharing part of my story with you today, reminding me that my spirit has room to soar here. It's a privilege to be in connection with you and be part of this amazing congregation.

“Inspiration and Challenges” (Gary DeCarolis)

I was very fortunate to have the unconditional love of my father and at other tough times in my life the love by special friends. That love has allowed me to move through life with confidence, faith in myself and the good in people.

When I have suffered the most is when I have worked hard on things that I feel passionate about: children’s issues, representing my ward as a city counselor and people who have not had a fair shot at the benefits this county offers others and have not respected my own need for a spiritual community, time to relax and enjoy life pursuits, music, friends, adventure, vacations.

This balance is important because first subconsciously and then in a very clear measured way, I have chosen to make my life one that is about system change to bring justice, equality and respect to all those that desire those rights but have not been able to secure those in our country.

But let me take you back to an event that happened early in my life that I believe as much as any other event in my consciousness helped shape who I am and what I do. I must say it took me a long time to hit upon this event and bring it worth with all the power it deserves in my life.

When I was 3 we lived in Hopewell, NJ. My Dad was a music therapist at the Skillman Neuro-psychiatric Institute. One day he took me to work with him. He always loved to take me with him to work if he had the chance. As we entered the building where his office was we walked down some steps at the bottom of those steps were cells or cages with straw on the floor and inside were people who were naked. From there we went into a large room which actually was his music room. In the back is where the electric shock treatment baths were located. I can still remember them vividly. Soon people began to file in. People with severe disabilities. They all picked up an instrument and the leader of the band, my dad, began to work with them. All I can remember is the smiles on their faces. Smiles on faces that other people had given up on. But my father loved each one for who they were and the gift they brought to that music room. We left that day and life went on.

My father, who had lost his right leg in WW II, left that Institution and became the band director at a NJ high school. In fact, he also led the marching band for over 25 years. Marching along side the band members with out a limp! He made it his business to perfect the walk even though he lost his leg above the knee.

What that event did for me, I realized later, is to respect all people no matter who they are and what life circumstance they are in. It also brought forth the part of me that will fight doggedly for social justice for all people. I bring that passion into all that I do whether it was representing Ward 3, designing and building a children’s mental health system in VT or running the federal children’s mental health office in DC.

Now many of you know when you try and change systems the entrenched parties will fight back hard. I have been able to handle everything that has come my way when my life is in balance. That unconditional love of my dad and a few other close friends and family has allowed me to take great risks on behalf of what is the “right” thing to do. But when I ignore myself in order to do one more thing for others without paying attention to me, I then have suffered greatly. I haven’t had the energy to hold off the pressure that goes along with system change work. Usually I have had to pull back, regroup and then move forward again. At 56 I’m getting much better at it!!!!

So in the end, find your passion, take good care of yourself and be with those that care about you wildly. These are the critical pieces to a good life.