

DUPC Sunday Forums

February 2025

February 2nd

The Spirituality of Thomas Merton

Dr. Monica Weis

Dr. Weis will present highlights from the life of Thomas Merton, an American Trappist monk who was also a social activist, theologian, mystic, and scholar of comparative religions. Dr. Weis, emerita professor of English at Nazareth University, has written several books on Merton.

February 9th

My Spiritual Journey: Fireflies and Illuminations

Gail Mott

Gail has spent many of her 90 years bringing attention and care to those in need, both in our community and across the world. In all of the many justice actions she has been a part of throughout the years, Gail has been there as a gentle, yet powerful presence. She shares that, "after 90 years you would think that the path on my faith journey would now be a straight one-but it continues to be a bumpy road illuminated by great souls who show me the way and help keep me moving forward."

February 16th

No Sunday Forum - Food and Kinship Worship

February 23rd

My Spiritual Journey

Reverend Phil Davis

Come hear Rev Davis share about his own faith experiences, from his early days growing up in the Bronx, to his change of careers, to what brought him to DUPC.

Sundays, 9:45 AM ~ The Shaw Room

Gail Mott: Spiritual Journey
Downtown United Presbyterian Church.
Sunday Forum: February 9, 2025

Part I: Part I is the script that was used for the Sunday Forum presentation.

Part II: An expanded version with additional reflections on DUPC's Social Justice history.

Part I:

Have you ever gone out on a beautiful summer night and watched fireflies as they radiate their twinkling light throughout the darkness? One starry summer night a few years ago Jim drove me to a wooded area on a steep, narrow road in Geneseo to see a magical sight. We stood in awe in the midst of thousands of fireflies. Their glowing light made me feel that we were in a sacred place, suspended between sky and earth. All those fireflies joined together in a brilliant light of community. Each single one sparkled, but together they created a sustaining light.

I have felt that transformative light in my own life - radiating from people whose lives give meaning to mine- individually and as a community. The support of our church for so many justice endeavors has sustained me over the years. Together you have illuminated my journey. Thank you.

To mix metaphors a bit, I want to share that for 64 years Peter was my north star. He guided my way on and gave me unconditional encouragement and support. And he lived out his words: "We are all part of something much bigger than us. Each of us is created with essentials of goodness within us - quiet, peace, love, caring. In all we do we must try to reach and be led by those parts of us. And by the oneness and the All of things."

And now - a little background. I go back such a long way - this will be a bit of a history lesson.

I was born in Portsmouth, NH. It's now so gentrified that I don't recognize it. But when I was growing up it was a town where almost everyone worked at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard. My father was a draughtsman who designed submarines and he walked the two miles to work every day. Later he bought a car. But during WWII gas was rationed and sometimes unavailable. There were few cars on the road during the day, and never at night. Occasionally my mother and her friend took their daughters to a movie. On the way home my friend and I would link arms and march down the middle of the street singing at the top of our lungs, all kinds of patriotic songs, including George M Cohan's

Over there, over there,
Send the word, send the word over there
That the Yanks are coming,
the Yanks are coming,
The drums rum-tumming everywhere.

So prepare, say a prayer,
Send the word, send the word to beware -
We'll be over, we're coming over,
And we won't come back till it's over, over there.

Not having a car meant that we could no longer go to St. John's Episcopal Church. The only thing I remember about it is that incense was flung every Sunday - and one time a worshiper passed out. So we walked to the First United Methodist Church which my brother and I attended until I graduated from high school. One day my Catholic friend, Maureen Quirk, and I were walking by the church on our way home and I asked her to come in with me for a minute. She looked horrified, crossed herself and said, No - that's a mortal sin!
We've come a long way in inter-denominational relations, haven't we!

I myself became a Roman Catholic for six weeks one summer when I was in college. Having grown up in a naval community I wondered what it would be like to be a naval officer, so went off to the Naval Officer Training School in Bainbridge, MD. to find out. For the first three days I endured being awakened at 6 o'clock with reveille sounding on a cracked record. But I had noticed that the Catholic girls were tapped on the shoulder at 5 - and decided that was preferable. The Latin Mass was actually a pleasure to listen to and a meditative time. (I'm glad Thomas Merton and I have something in common!) When I got back home the first thing I did was write a letter resigning from the Navy.

The Vietnam War lasted from 1954-1975. In 1963, Peter did his two years of alternative service at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda. While we were there our Episcopal church paired interested white families with black families, and we became friends with the Hagens, who lived in DC. - and learned about The Green Book and had our first inkling about Traveling While Black. When Peter joined the Acton Medical Associates in Acton, MA. All four doctors were Quakers who had been conscientious objectors during WW II. We wanted to keep up our friendship with the Hagens, so invited their son, Willard, who was 11 years old to spend a few weeks with us. Johnny, Jim, Bill and Emily ranged from 1-6 years old and he had fun with them all. One day I dropped off Willard at the toy shop to look around while I did an errand. When I picked him up he was beaming and so excited he couldn't wait to tell me, "This is the first time I've ever gone into a shop and not been followed and told to leave! They let me look at EVERYTHING!" Another small understanding of the effects of racism.

Elizabeth Boardman, wife of one of Peter's partners, became my dear friend and mentor and one of those luminous fireflies. Every Saturday she organized a silent vigil on the village green against the Vietnam war. Her pro-choice stance led her to write a Cantata about the need for each child that was born to be LOVED.

In 1968, after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, Elizabeth's husband Donnell and Peter felt the need to work with the black community in Roxbury - a neighborhood of Boston where rioting had gone on for three days. So they met with Guido St. Laurent, a black leader who had

been blinded by a white man in prison. Guido and his two bodyguards told Peter and Donnell that what they needed was help at night - and that the bodyguards would accompany them. So a meeting was arranged in Acton to talk together about how this might work. We waited for them all evening. There was no response when we called the office. The following morning, when I picked up the Boston Globe from the front steps this headline greeted me: MASSACRE IN ROXBURY. Guido and his bodyguards had been murdered. No one was ever charged with the crime. Peter believed it had been the work of COINTELPRO - a series of FBI covert and illegal

projects aimed at surveilling, infiltrating, discrediting and disrupting organizations across the country that the FBI considered subversive.

After that Peter decided to leave family practice to get involved in one of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society programs: creating community-led health care facilities in poor areas across the country. At least half the employees had to live in those neighborhoods. Then anyone who wanted a job would be trained for a position that interested them.

So we moved to Baltimore and then on to Tucson, where Peter was medical director for a new health center serving the neighborhood in the poorest part of town. He worked days, nights, and weekends and was so happily busy we never got to see the Grand Canyon. But, after two years, the El Rio Santa Cruz Neighborhood Health Center was up and operating - and it still is.

Southside Presbyterian Church was in that neighborhood. When we heard that a Chicano activist was going to be speaking there against the Vietnam War we made our way through crowds of people to hear him. The minister introducing the speaker was John Fife and we were struck by his vitality and warmth. So on Sunday we all returned and knew this would be our church home. Blacks and whites, Chicanos, and members of the indigenous Tohono O'odham Nation and the Pascua Yaqui, young and old people, filled the pews of this small wooden church - where Mrs. Johnson played the upright piano with such vigor that it had fallen over twice and had to be propped up with boulders. As for John Fife, he lived out the words spoken by the current pastor at Southside: *When a church is being its most faithful to scripture, it is always standing on the side of the oppressed and the persecuted.* John illuminated our lives and countless others across the country. When he was nominated to become Moderator of the Presbyterian Church USA he said, Just as long as you know that if you elect me you'll be electing a convicted felon. In 1986 he had been convicted of violating immigration laws and served five years probation.

In 1972 we moved to Pittsford village where everything we needed was in walking distance. It was election year and we put an enormous MC GOVERN banner across the front of the house and were almost driven out of town! Churches abounded in the village. But we couldn't find anything like Southside. However, I did go to DUPC for meetings of the ACCT Council (Action of Church and Community Together), precursor of the Justice Team. I was representing the Heifer Project and the Nestle Boycott. At that time, community members had equal voting privileges. Isabel Morrison was the full-time ACCT Coordinator and it was a large and very active group.

In Pittsford I met Ann Klein. Born on Christmas day, she was a shining light. Joan and Bill Mackey knew her - and maybe others too because she was a church member. Ann walked hand in hand with Julian of Norwich, the 14th century English mystic, whose words kindled her faith. "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." Ann's thoughts were fresh and original. She spoke of well-being and woe with clarity and insight. Here is one sentence of her remarks on Prayer:

"Most human lives contain a grueling number of knocks, hurts, and disappointments; and the real question is whether we swallow them down, pretending to ourselves and others that they haven't really happened, or admit them as the wounds they are...."

Ann led me to take a course on Dietrich Bonhoeffer at the divinity school. For Bonhoeffer, everything came back to who Jesus was and is - and to the inseparable relationship between Jesus, community, and responsibility.

For him Christian freedom meant ENGAGING the world and doing what we can for ONE ANOTHER -- not for ourselves. You probably know that he was imprisoned for joining a plot against Hitler. He listened to and communicated with his jailers and fellow prisoners in Buchenwald Concentration Camp and was a healing presence for everyone there. Bonhoeffer wrote from prison, "The church is a church only when it exists for others. To make a start it should give away all its property to those in need." His final words, reported by one of the guards, were, "This is the end—for ME, the BEGINNING of life". He was 39 years old.

Ann persuaded me that it would be worth coming to church to hear David Romig preach. She was right. After hearing him we joined DUPC. David was not only a great preacher - he was - among many other attributes - an inclusive leader, a scholar with a great sense of humor, and a poet who also wrote (along with his wife Vicky) two Christmas musicals: Joseph the Carpenter and Cricket on the Hearth - both performed at DUPC. What a luminous presence he was!

It's hard to believe that was 50 years ago! I'm realizing that the church was the foundation for much that I did because Downtown Church was known as a place that takes risks for justice and inclusivity, and for doing God's work in our world. We opened our doors to the community and offered free space for meetings and programs. As an example:

DUPC gave free monthly meeting space to ROCLA (the Rochester Committee on Central America). In 1991 ROCLA gave our White Dove Award to Howard Zinn, the eminent historian and author of "A People's History of the United States." When he taught at Spelman College he had helped organize sit-ins to challenge segregation. He was a warm and generous man and made us feel that being with us was exactly where he most wanted to be. As an eyewitness I can tell you that he loved chocolate ice cream sundaes with whipped cream and a cherry on top.

The ACLU had rented a suite of offices on the third floor, and when I was on the Board it was a very active place. Once, we brought in Noam Chomsky - that was an amazing experience! The line to get into Monroe Community College to hear him wound around the whole building.

Both he and Howard Zinn were principled truth-tellers - like Bonhoeffer.

In 1983, we at DUPC learned about civil wars that were raging in Guatemala and El Salvador. Increasing numbers of Salvadorans and Guatemalans were fleeing for their lives. But our government was financially supporting those governments and denying all asylum requests, claiming that those trying to come here were communists.

We had heard about the Sanctuary Movement and wanted to know more - so invited John Fife, one of its founders, to help us understand what it would mean to become a sanctuary congregation. He warned us that the US government considered the granting of sanctuary to be illegal, that there could be large fines and five-year jail sentences. Then he looked at all of us and said - but what we're asking YOU to risk is nothing compared to the immense suffering of these people.

So after a nine-month study of the legal and moral aspects of sanctuary we voted overwhelmingly to become a sanctuary congregation. Fr Jim Callan and Corpus Christi already had said that if one other congregation would join them we could declare Sanctuary. And so we did.

And here I'd like to lift up Jim Callan, His light and love shone on everyone whose life he touched. He visited Peter in the hospital, walked inconspicuously with the farmworkers in Labor Day parades, went with a group of us to El Salvador during the war and kept us all in his warm light. He worked for justice, lived a life of lovingkindness, and walked humbly with God, Jesus, and all the rest of us.

Later, Temple B'rith Kodesh, Lake Ave. Baptist, The House Church, and the Religious Society of Friends/Quakers joined us in a covenantal relationship. In June of 1984 we celebrated the arrival of the Gomez family from El Salvador - Alejandro and Leticia, their four children and their grandmother. They took up residence in the third floor apartment upstairs. Alejandro spoke about the need to stop US funding of El Salvador to crowds all across the city.

Time is short - so I'll skip to May 23, 1986, when ten immigration agents in four limousines converged on Alejandro and Leticia, as they were walking back to DUPC from their lawyer's office. Several agents pushed Alejandro into one of the limousines and they all sped off. After three frantic hours Leticia learned that the INS had arrested him as a national security threat. Bail had been set at \$50,000 cash. Word went out across the community. The following day an office was set up at DUPC. People lined up to contribute. Children emptied their piggybanks. By the end of the day we had collected \$50,000 in cash. That night a jubilant caravan of 9 cars drove to the Peace Bridge in Buffalo with the money. At 3 AM Alejandro was back in Rochester.

However, he had become aware of increasing surveillance and was afraid - especially for their children. One day in June of 1986, unknown to any of us on the Sanctuary committee, the Gomez family went to a "Party" - taking nothing with them except their papers so the children wouldn't

know what was happening. Other friends of the family had picked them up and taken them across the Peace Bridge to Ontario. Canada welcomed them! They were safe at last.

On Sunday we were given this letter from Alejandro. He said:

"Dear Brothers and Sisters. It hasn't been easy for me to make this decision...Never has anyone penetrated my heart in the way that you have. I love all of you equally and it was very difficult leaving you without saying good-bye. May God bless you for all the good that is in your hearts. I love you all." He went on to say that the precarious conditions of his existence had been destroying the lives of his children bit by bit and that "their lives do not belong to me...I can decide about my own life but not about the lives of my children. I was sure that I would have been deported, along with my family, whom I have caused to live in fear."

In March of 1993 our own prophet, Janie Spahr, became our traveling evangelist who let her light shine out of the darkness of Presbyterian Church POLICIES. She traveled around the country spreading the good news about GLBTQ+ issues - doing far more for the cause than she ever could have by preaching at DUPC.

The 50th Anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was coming up in 1998. DUPC gave us meeting and we started planning a program. The church also gave us the use of the sanctuary on Dec. 10. After that we decided to lift up one of the 30 Articles every year. **Article 14 states that everyone has the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries.**

Lately I've been realizing how much refugees have informed and enriched my life. I am deeply moved by their courage, their risks, their challenges, their faith and their hopes. Each one is a beacon of light. Talking about them could be another Forum session. Briefly, in 1983 **Abraham Thon Bol**, a young agronomist, came here to attend Presbyterian Youth conference. Everyone he met felt humbled to be in his presence. One Lutheran pastor said, "I feel as if I have met an angel of God." Abraham was eager to share his vision of how the people in southern Sudan (it was still one country) could become self-sufficient. His one wish was to take seeds back to his country. The Harris Seeds Company offered them free and employees were astonished when he took only four packs. "This is all I need," was his answer. Over the next 22 years of our correspondence his letters always reflected his commitment to the welfare of his people. His story is one of long endurance and suffering. After being imprisoned for his work he was given asylum here. But he never could bring his family. It was an honor to have been his friend.

The Gomez family you know about. They've been living happily in Fort Erie with family nearby and lots of grandchildren.

Cecilia Moran was in sanctuary here for a short time. In 1983 when she was a college student in San Salvador she was imprisoned and tortured before being released. Ever since coming here she has worked in Long Island for other refugees. She joined a case against the Salvadoran general who had been responsible for her torture and who had been living in the US. They won and he was deported.

You can ask our own **Mauricio Morales** about his experiences in El Salvador that caused him to flee.

Abdii/Girma Erena was given asylum here after torture in Ethiopia that caused him to lose his memory for 18 months. He is an Oromo - one of the persecuted majority - and his dream is to work for his people and teach the children the Oromo language and culture. He appreciated his time at DUPC. Currently he is in Minneapolis and going through hard times.

We're familiar with **Sebastian's and Salva Dut's** inspirational stories and the impact they continue to have on their communities in South Sudan.

Kehar Khan and his family arrived last March. He was a religious refugee who had been tortured in Pakistan for becoming a Christian. They, as all other refugees, had to leave everything behind. Kehar's vision had been to start a university in Pakistan using a pre-Newtonian model of teaching - actively engaging the students.

And of course all of you all know about our **NEW friend** who is working to make this his home.

In September of 2004 Joan and Bill Mackey, Sandy Cain, and Marilyn Mould were among the friends who stood by me at the Monroe County Hall of Justice as I was waiting to give a Judge my war protest statement. On Ash Wednesday in 2004, two weeks before the US invaded Iraq, I had joined 12 others in attempting to go into the Federal Building to pray. Before that, a Catholic deacon had put smudged crosses on our foreheads - from burned dollar bills all of us had contributed. We had gone to jail overnight on charges of criminal trespass. But on that September day we were told that the case was dismissed because the DA's three witnesses didn't show up. However, it turns out we DID commit one crime, and could still be charged with burning government property. Did you know that your dollar bills belong to the government?

The Rev. Pat Youngdahl, who was our pastor from 2004-2012 and again from 2014-2021, gave much of herself in her ministry. One example of her loving care was the day I called, simply to let her know that Peter had had an operation and was in the hospital. I had no idea she and Michal were on their way to a weekend retreat with Pema Chodron, the Buddhist Nun who always had a waiting list for her sessions. They were already in Albany. So I reassured her that all was well, and that I simply wanted her to know. Four hours later she walked into the hospital room with her warm smile and arms outstretched to Peter - a sustaining light. That is something I'll always treasure.

Because of what all of us are going through these days I want to mention Sr. Joan Chittister. Her words of "**prophetic endurance**" give us something to ponder. In an interview with Fr. Richard Rohr she said: "The moral decline of the society as a whole can only be finally and fully reversed on one condition: that we each learn to turn moral concern into **prophetic endurance**. Each of us must speak up, speak out and speak for justice and peace everywhere. We must persist until we become again what we have always wanted to be, until we all stand more for the TRUTHS of the GOSPEL than for the goals of the government." Prophetic endurance is what we're all called to do, and all of us probably have been encouraged and sustained at one time or another by the prophetic endurance of others. Sr. Joan's words have illuminated my life from the time I read her words about entering Mount St. Benedict's Monastery in Erie, Pennsylvania at the age of 16.

My most dramatic experience of **prophetic endurance** was watching the people of El Salvador in 1990, during the last year of the US-supported war against the Salvadoran people. The delegation I was with (including Fr. Jim) gathered with thousands of Salvadorans in an evening march from the Cathedral to the University of Central America, the site of the mass assassination of six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter by soldiers who had been trained at the US Army School of the Americas. (Ten years earlier, the people had been sustained by their beloved Archbishop, Oscar Romero. In his last sermon at the Cathedral, he proclaimed, "No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is contrary to the will of God . . . In the name of God then, in the name of this suffering people I ask you, I beg you, I command you: stop the repression." The following day, March 24, as he was saying Mass he was assassinated. He was 64 years old. He is now St. Romero)

That evening thousands of Salvadorans lined up in the street, knowing they were putting themselves in danger. Nevertheless, together we marched up the long hill, chanting: ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido! The People, united, will never be defeated!

Prophetic Endurance in standing together against oppressive forces is something the people of Amador Hernandez know well. Amador Hernandez is in Chiapas, Mexico, near the Guatemalan border. In September of 1999 Peter and I flew there in response to a call by fifteen Mexican human rights organizations. They needed American observers to witness the low intensity war in Amador Hernandez, a tiny, remote village, where the nearest road was a ten-hour hike up and down mountains. Peter had said yes immediately. I was horrified. Only 9 months earlier he had gone through open heart surgery, a by-pass, and then many complications. But if he was going so was I. Ten days later we were off.

One month earlier the Mexican Army had dropped paratroopers on this village of 250 people and occupied it. But the people - mostly women and children - all unarmed, shouted them down the steep hill, away from the corn fields and into the jungle, and that's where they stayed - in a heavily fortified encampment.

Every day the people feared being attacked. They were constantly harassed by patrols. In other locations the soldiers had displaced almost 25,000 people - burning their homes and fields in the process . Why? One reason: There were vast petroleum, uranium, and other natural resources under those Mayan villages, and the government and corporations wanted to put a road through to extract all that buried treasure. The government did not want human rights observers around. We were watched and followed from the time we landed.

It was the beginning of the rainy season so everyone was in a hurry to take off because once the rains started planes couldn't fly there. Peter and I, the only ones who didn't speak Spanish, were told to get into a WW II piper cub. Peter sat next to the pilot and held the door shut while two of us crouched in the back and held on for dear life, The bush pilot - with red banana and droopy moustache - took off across a grassy field and up over the mountains - then abruptly the plane turned left, went into a dive, and before we had time to be scared to death we found ourselves back to where we had started - the engine had failed. On the second try we

flew over mountains and deep valleys and landed on a small grassy strip covered in mud. Giggling children, women in traditional, colorful dress, black-hooded Zapatistas, and village men welcomed us. These people worked hard for their existence - they shared the land, lived on the corn and beans they raised - along with native fruits - and little else. In recent years conditions had turned desperate because cheap US "terminator" corn that cannot be replanted was all that was available. So they could sell barely enough to survive. Yet they provided shelter, food and protection for us. They led us down steep muddy slopes and helped us across rushing streams as we hiked to the army encampment, showing us along the way corn crops damaged by army helicopters. We slogged our way through dark mud ten inches deep, into the Lancondon jungle. Drenched in sweat we followed ancient trails used by the local Mayan Indians to chase deer, and carry wood and corn. Then we saw them - through the dense green foliage and tangled vines - a long line of soldiers in full battle gear, some with crowd-control shields and helmets, others with automatic rifles. They were behind coils of razor wire and trenches lined with sandbags. Their equipment was recognizably American, as were the helicopters circling right over our heads. The troops, faces set and angry, videographed us and photographed us - as we took photos of them - a peculiar form of communication!

Facing the soldiers, and only ten feet away, were people from other villages who had come for support: 200 indigenous women, men and children using their only weapon - their voices. They chanted loudly for democracy, for economic justice and some autonomy for the indigenous population. They sang Zapatista songs and called for dialogue. But their voices were drowned out by the army's loudspeakers blasting out martial music, polkas, and, oddly, "Celito Lindo."

We followed the path around the army compound which had been cut out of the jungle and saw the traps: crude but horrific tangles of sharp pointed sticks which would catch and hold a leg - the kind used in Vietnam. The villagers had uncovered 36 of them. Standing outside the army encampment we were officially "welcomed" in a ceremony where we all told the officers who were, whom we represented. Those who spoke Spanish also asked many questions. When it was time for me to call out my name I added that I was from the Downtown United Presbyterian Church in Rochester, NY!

Once back in the village I was more than ready to rest - but I followed the women, who went into to the small church with a few low benches. They kneeled and prayed for a long time. And I wondered if they were thanking God for having given them a day without conflict.

The rainy season left us marooned for an extra day in Amador Hernandez because the planes couldn't get through the clouds that billowed up from the valleys and obscured the mountains. The rain at night sounded like a waterfall. But on the third day there was a sudden break in the clouds and two planes circled, banked and landed. We ran with our knapsacks, waving good-bye, leaped in, and took off in tight formation. One day later, in Mexico City, immigration authorities followed us to the press conference, took photos, and asked questions. A human rights lawyer escorted us back to the airport in case of trouble. There wasn't any.

And so we returned to the land of plumbing and plenty. But Peter and I experienced a deep sadness at leaving people who shared all that they had, who were so vulnerable and so courageous, and whose voices are their only weapons in their struggle for democracy and economic justice. And we knew that our job was to tell the public about the war there - and the role of our government in that struggle for control.

In ending I'd like to share with you a prayer from June of 1996, when I was a liturgist.

O God of all creation, we thank you for this vibrant earth which you made as a seamless entity, with no frames or boundaries or divisions.

We are grateful for fresh air and clean water, for woodlands and farmlands.

Help us to tread softly as we walk this good earth, and to know that each step we take makes a difference to others, even to the ant underfoot.

Keep alive in us a sense of wonder - for the mystery of seeds, for the magic of fireflies, for the intricacies of a columbine.

In the Native American tradition, keep us mindful of the seventh generation

as we go about our daily tasks; for being good stewards of your creation **now** will ensure that there **are** seven generations to come, and seven more after that.

O God, life is such a privilege. And yet so many of our sisters and brothers suffer.

We think of those whose air is polluted, who have no clean water to drink, whose woodlands have been cut down, whose farmlands have been taken over.

And we are reminded of all those who have been used for others' interests and who are not in control of their own destinies, whose very lives are in jeopardy - our sisters and brothers whose heads are too bowed down for wonder.

Help us, dear God, to recognize our complicity, unintentional as it may be, in their plight.

Give us the strength to relinquish our privilege that is gained at the expense of others, and to let go of whatever we hold that is more than we need.

Help us to walk with and to learn from our sisters and brothers and to make their struggle our own.

And, God, help us to open our lives to your purpose - knowing that Jesus was put to death for His radical compassion; and that we are called as individuals, as church, as community, to walk with Him. Amen

Part II:

Have you ever gone out on a beautiful summer night and watched fireflies as they radiate their twinkling light throughout the darkness? One starry summer night a few years ago Jim drove me to a wooded area on a steep, narrow road in Geneseo to see a magical sight. We stood in awe in the midst of thousands of fireflies. Their glowing light made me feel that we were in a sacred place, suspended between sky and earth. All those fireflies joined together in a brilliant light of community. Each single one sparkled, but together they created a sustaining light.

And that light can be transformative.

I feel the need to mix metaphors and share that for 64 years Peter was my constant north star, who guided my way on with his unconditional support.

I've been thinking about these fireflies in terms of DUPC - and about how much our church has meant to the entire Rochester community. And will talk about that in a few minutes.

But first a little background - I go back such a long way - this will be a bit of a history lesson, too!

Portsmouth, NH is where I was born It's now so gentrified that's unrecognizable to me. But when I was growing up it was a town where almost everyone worked at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, across the Piscataqua River in what technically is Maine. My father was a draughtsman who designed submarines and walked the two miles to work every day. Later he bought a car. But During WWII gas was rationed and sometimes unavailable. There was hardly a car on the road during the day, and never at night. Occasionally my mother and her friend took their daughters to a movie. On the way home my friend and I would link arms and march down the middle of the street singing at the top of our voices, all kinds of patriotic songs, including George M Cohan's

Over there, over there,
Send the word, send the word over there
That the [Yanks](#) are coming, the Yanks are coming,
The drums rum-tumming everywhere.
So prepare, say a prayer,
Send the word, send the word to beware -
We'll be over, we're coming over,
And we won't come back till it's over, over there.

Not having a car meant that we couldn't go to St. John's Episcopal Church where the only thing I remember is that incense was flung every Sunday and some parishioners passed out. So we walked to the First United Methodist Church which we attended until I graduated from high school. One day my Catholic friend, Maureen Quirk, and I were walking by the church on our way home and I asked her to come in with me for a minute because I had to get something. She looked horrified, crossed herself and said, No - that's a mortal sin!

I myself became a Roman Catholic for six weeks one summer when I was in college. Having grown up in a naval community I wondered what it would be like to be a naval officer, so went off to the Naval Officer Training School in Bainbridge, MD. For three days I endured being awakened at 6 o'clock with reveille sounding on a cracked record. But I had noticed that the Catholics were tapped on the shoulder at 5 - and decided that was preferable. The Latin Mass was actually a pleasure to listen to and a meditative time. (I'm glad Thomas Merton and I have something in common!) When I got back home the first thing I did was write a letter resigning from the Navy.

Much to my regret, my earliest "illumination" wasn't until 1965 when Peter joined the Acton Medical Associates in Acton, MA. All four doctors were Quakers and had been conscientious objectors during WWII. We moved there from Peter's alternative service at the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda. While there our Episcopal church paired interested white families with black families, and we became friends with the Hagens, who lived in DC. We wanted to keep up our friendship after moving to Acton so invited their son, Willard, who was 11 years old (Johnny, Jim, Bill and Emily -our four children - ranged from 1-6 years old.) to spend three weeks with us. One day I had an errand to, so dropped off Willard at the toy shop to look around. When I picked him up he was beaming and so excited he couldn't wait to tell me, "This is the first time I've ever gone into a shop and not been followed and told to leave! They let me look at EVERYTHING!"

Elizabeth Boardman, wife of one of Peter's partners, became my dear friend and mentor. She organized silent vigils against the Vietnam war every Saturday on the village green (and ran for Congress on the platform to Stop the War). Her pro-choice stance led her to write a Cantata about the need for each child that was born to be a child who is loved.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968 Donnell Boardman and Peter felt the need to work with the black community in Roxbury - a neighborhood in Boston where there had been rioting for three days. So they met with Guido St. Laurent, a black leader who had been blinded by a white man in prison. Guido and his two bodyguards told Peter and Donnell that what they needed was help at night and that the bodyguards would accompany them. So a meeting was arranged in Acton for the rest of the doctors to ask questions and figure out if and how this would work. We waited for Guido all evening - with no response when we called the office. The following morning, as I picked up the Boston Globe from the front steps this headline greeted me: MASSACRE IN ROXBURY. Guido and his bodyguards had been killed. No one was ever charged with the crime. Peter believed it had been the work of the FBI's COINTELPRO.

Peter had become aware of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society's federally-funded but locally governed health centers in poor areas across the country. At least half the employees and board had to live in those neighborhoods. Anyone who wanted a job would be trained for a position that interested them. Peter was eager to be part of an effort that would benefit so many people. So we moved to Tucson. Peter worked days, nights, and weekends and was so happily busy we never got to see the Grand Canyon. But, after two years, the El Rio Santa Cruz Neighborhood Health Center was up and operating.

Southside Presbyterian Church was in that neighborhood. When we heard that a Chicano leader was going to be speaking there we made our way in amongst crowds of people. Rev. John Fife introduced the speaker, and we were struck by his vitality and warmth. So on Sunday we all returned and knew this would be our church home. Blacks and whites, Chicanos, and members of the indigenous Tohono O'odham Nation and the Pascua Yaqui, young and old filled the pews of this small wooden church - and Mrs. Johnson played the upright piano with such vigor that it had fallen over twice and had to be propped up with boulders. As for John Fife, he lived out the

words spoken by the current pastor at Southside: *When a church is being its most faithful to scripture, it is always standing on the side of the oppressed and the persecuted.*" More about John Fife later.

In 1972 we moved to Pittsford village where everything we needed was in walking distance. It was election year and we put an enormous MC GOVERN banner across the front of the house and were almost driven out of town! There were two churches practically across the street. But we couldn't find anything like Southside. However, I did go to DUPC for meetings of the ACCT Council (Action of Church and Community Together), precursor of the Justice Team. At that time, community members had equal voting privileges. I was representing the Heifer Project and the Nestle Boycott. Isabel Morrison was the full-time ACCT Coordinator and it was a very active, congenial group.

In Pittsford I met Ann Klein - a gift to our world. Joan and Bill Mackey and maybe others here knew her, too, because she was a DUPC member. Born on Christmas day she was a star in the firmament. Ann walked hand in hand with Julian of Norwich, the 14th century English mystic, whose words kindled her faith. "All will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well." Ann's thoughts were fresh and original. She spoke of well-being and woe with clarity and insight. Here is one sentence of her remarks on Prayer:

"Most human lives contain a grueling number of knocks, hurts, and disappointments, and the real question is whether we swallow them down, pretending to ourselves and others that they haven't really happened, or admit them as the wounds they are...."

Ann also led me to take a course on Dietrich Bonhoeffer at CRCDS. For Bonhoeffer, everything came back to who Jesus was and is - and to the inseparable relationship between Jesus, community, and responsibility.

For Bonhoeffer Christian freedom meant engaging the world and doing what we can for ONE ANOTHER -- not for ourselves. You probably know that he was imprisoned for joining a plot against Hitler. He listened to and communicated with his jailers and fellow prisoners in Buchenwald Concentration Camp and was a healing presence for everyone there. Bonhoeffer wrote from prison, "The church is a church only when it exists for others. To make a start it should give away all its property to those in need." His final words, reported by one of the guards, were, "This is the end. For ME, the BEGINNING of life". He was 39 years old.

Ann persuaded me that it would be worth coming to church to hear David Romig preach. She was right. David was not only a great preacher - he was a poet who also wrote the Christmas musical, Joseph the Carpenter and Cricket on the Hearth. So Peter and I joined DUPC.

It's hard to believe that was 50 years ago! And for all those years Downtown Church has been known as a place that takes risks for justice and inclusivity, and for doing God's work in our world. Through the years DUPC has worked to carry out the Presbyterian Mission statement that says, "The church is called to participate in God's activity in the world - even at the risk of

losing its own life." And DUPC has also been known for its hospitality to the whole Rochester community. Two small examples:

- Groups were always welcome to gather in the Hallock Lounge before marching to City Hall or to the Federal Building for demonstrations.
- The staff set up tables and chairs for press conferences that were held in the Hallock Lounge - often for organizations that were housed in the church: ACLU, Politics of Food, and the Judicial Process Commission.
- I remember Peter being interviewed by the press about the Pastors for Peace Friendshipment caravan to Cuba. You may know that we've had an embargo on trade with Cuba since 1962. So nothing was allowed to be sent there. However, Rev. Lucius Walker and the Pastors for Peace caravan with medical and school supplies waited unwaveringly at the border crossings - sometimes for days - until finally they were allowed through. Every year we gathered quantities of medical and school supplies in our garage. For several years Jacque Hancock contributed prostheses. On one particular day two trucks were parked outside the church waiting to be loaded. Children and adults were painting them with colorful designs and slogans. One truck had a big banner draped on both sides - made by Kermit Speer (he and his wife Peggy were long-time DUPC members) proclaiming: I'D RATHER BREAK THE LAWS OF THE UNITED STATES THAN THE LAW OF GOD. .

I found that almost everything I did was connected with the church - even if peripherally. DUPC gave free monthly meeting space for ROCLA (the Rochester Committee for Latin America) and ROCLA hosted Howard Zinn for a fund-raiser. The author of "A People's History of the United States" was warm, and generous with his time. As an eyewitness I can tell you that he loved chocolate ice cream sundaes with whipped cream and a cherry on top.

The ACLU rented a suite of offices on the third floor and was constantly taking cases.. Once we brought in Noam Chomsky - what an experience that was! The line to get into Monroe Community College to hear him went further than the eye could see!

In 1983, we at DUPC learned about civil wars that were raging in Guatemala and El Salvador. Increasing numbers of Salvadorans and Guatemalans were fleeing for their lives . But our government was financially supporting those governments and denying all asylum requests, claiming that those trying to come here were communists.

We had heard about the Sanctuary Movement and wanted to know more - so invited John Fife, one of its founders, to help us understand what it would mean to become a sanctuary congregation. He warned us that the US government considered the granting of sanctuary to be illegal, that there could be large fines and five-year jail sentences. Then he looked at all of us and said - but what we're asking you to risk is nothing compared to the immense suffering of these people.

After an intense nine-month study of the legal and moral aspects of sanctuary we voted overwhelmingly to become a sanctuary congregation. Fr. Jim Callan and Corpus Christi already had said that if one other congregation would join them we could declare Sanctuary.

And here I'd like to lift up Jim Callan. He visited Peter in the hospital, walked inconspicuously with the farmworkers in Labor Day parades, went with a group of us to El Salvador during the war and kept us all in his warm light. He worked for justice, lived a life of lovingkindness, and walked humbly with God, Jesus, and all the rest of us.

So DUPC joined Corpus Christi Church to declare Sanctuary. Temple B'rith Kodesh, Lake Ave. Baptist, The House Church, and the Religious Society of Friends/Quakers joined us in a covenantal relationship. In June of 1984 we celebrated the arrival of the Gomez family from El Salvador - Alejandro and Leticia, four children and their grandmother - with a service of welcome and thanksgiving. They took up residence in the third floor apartment of the Institute Building.

Alejandro, a community leader who had been imprisoned and tortured for trying to form a bus union, spoke compellingly to Rochester audiences about the repressive Salvadoran government and US complicity. Without the \$1.5 million each day from the US that brutal regime could not have existed.

On May 23, 1986, Ten immigration agents in four limousines converged on Alejandro and Leticia as they were walking back to DUPC from their lawyer's office. Several agents pushed Alejandro into one of the limousines and they all sped off.

After three frantic hours Leticia learned that the INS had arrested him as a national security threat. Bail had been set at \$50,000 cash. A prayer service was called. Word went out across the Rochester community. The following day an office was set up at DUPC to monitor contributions and talk with the media. People lined up to contribute. Children emptied their piggybanks. By the end of the day we had collected \$50,000 in cash. That night a jubilant caravan of 9 cars drove to the Peace Bridge in Buffalo with the money. Some of the guards muttered to themselves that if it were up to them they'd shoot that whole family of communists. At 3 AM Alejandro was back in Rochester.

However, Alejandro became aware of increasing surveillance and was afraid - especially for their children. One day in June of 1986, unknown to any of us on the Sanctuary committee, the Gomez family went to a "Party" - taking nothing with them except their papers so the children wouldn't know what was happening. Other friends of the family had picked them up and driven them to Ontario. Canada welcomed them! They were safe.

On Sunday we were given this letter from Alejandro:

"Dear Brothers and Sisters. It hasn't been easy for me to make this decision...Never has anyone penetrated my heart in the way that you have. I love all of you equally and it was very

difficult leaving you without saying good-bye. May God bless you for all the good that is in your hearts. I love you all." He went on to say that the precarious conditions of his existence had been destroying the lives of his children bit by bit and that "their lives do not belong to me...I can decide about my own life but not about the lives of my children. I was sure that I would have been deported, along with my family, whom I have caused to live in fear."

(A few years later the American Baptist Church took the government to court and it was the government that was found guilty for disobeying its own national refugee act. The Sanctuary movement was thus exonerated!)

1987 - Once again DUPC came forward to help. The newly founded One World Goods needed a place to store crafts made by people from around the world to help lift them out of poverty. DUPC gave us space on the third floor. We had received a \$5000 grant from the Self-Development of People committee of the Presbytery to purchase inventory. It was a labor-intensive time as we hauled hand-made crafts from around the world into our cars, set them up in other churches, and hoped people would want to buy them. Today you can go to the store in Pittsford Plaza - especially to buy Palestinian olive oil!

In March of 1993 our own prophet, Janie Spahr, became DUPC's traveling evangelist who let her light shine out of the darkness of Presbyterian church POLICIES. She traveled around the country spreading the good news about GLBTQ+ issues - doing far more for the cause than she ever could have by preaching at DUPC.

In 1998 DUPC gave space for the newly formed Human Rights Day committee. We started planning for the 50th Anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights . And on Dec. 10 the church gave us the use of the sanctuary for the program. After that we decided to lift up one of the 30 Articles every year - so this became an ongoing gift of free space. **Article 14 states that everyone has the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries.**

2003 - Marcia Summers, Dayle Bird, and seven other DUPC members protested Vice President Cheney's fundraising trip right after deep cuts had been proposed in the Monroe County budget. Attendees paid a minimum of \$1000 to hear Cheney plead for funds for the Bush-Cheney ticket in 2004.

2004 - Joan and Bill Mackey, Sandy Cain, and Marilyn Mould were among the friends who stood by me at the Monroe County Hall of Justice in September as I prepared to give a Judge my war protest statement. On Ash Wednesday in 2004, two weeks before the US invaded Iraq, I had joined 12 others in attempting to go into the Federal Building to pray. Before that, a Catholic deacon had put smudged crosses on our foreheads - from burned dollar bills. We had gone to jail overnight on charges of criminal trespass. But the case was dismissed because the DA's three witnesses didn't show up. However, it turns out we DID commit one crime, and could still

be charged with: burning government property. Did you know that your dollar bills belong to the government?

2015 : DUPC and Spiritus housed 15 people who were homeless in the gymnasium for two weeks. Members of both churches offered food, clothing, bedding, money, hot meals, drove guests to morning destinations - and took care of our guests. Sandy Cain even bought and helped install an extra toilet!

And then we had our 50th anniversary:
We sing to you, D U P C
For 50 years of history
For willingness to share the call
To justice -and with love for all.

With gratitude to saints of old
Who, with their faith, have made us bold
To speak with joy and spread the word
That all God's people will be heard.

All of that is to remind us of some of the things that have made DUPC respected, appreciated and unique in our community. And that all things are possible where there is generosity and love.

A few other thoughts before ending:

In light of what we all are going through these days I want to mention Sr. Joan Chittister and her words of "prophetic endurance." In an interview with Fr. Richard Rohr she said: "The moral decline of the society as a whole can only be finally and fully reversed on one condition: that we each learn to turn moral concern into **prophetic endurance**. Each of us must speak up, speak out and speak for justice and peace everywhere. We must persist until we become again what we have always wanted to be, until we all stand more for the TRUTHS of the GOSPEL than for the goals of the government." Prophetic endurance is what we're all called to do, and all of us probably have been encouraged and sustained at one time or another by the prophetic endurance of others."

My most dramatic experience of prophetic endurance was in the people of El Salvador in 1990, during the last year of the US-supported war against the Salvadoran people. The delegation I was with (including Fr. Jim) gathered with thousands of Salvadorans in an evening march from the Cathedral to the University of Central America, the site of the mass assassination of six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter by soldiers who had been trained at the US Army School of the Americas. Ten years earlier, the people had been sustained by their beloved Archbishop, Oscar Romero. In his last sermon at the Cathedral, he proclaimed, "No soldier is obliged to obey an order that is contrary to the will of God . . . In the name of God then, in the

name of this suffering people I ask you, I beg you, I command you: stop the repression." The following day, March 24, as he was saying Mass he was assassinated. He was 64 years old.

The people, knowing they were putting themselves in danger, nevertheless marched up the long hill, chanting: ¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido! **The People, united, will never be defeated!**

Prophetic Endurance in standing together against oppressive forces is something the women of Amador Hernandez know well. Amador Hernandez is a tiny hamlet in jungles of Chiapas where Peter and I had been invited as human rights observers in the year 2000. The Mexican government, along with corporations, planned to build a highway through their land to exploit the natural resources. A unit of the Mexican army had parachuted into their village in order to intimidate the people. But the women resisted these troops by shouting them down a ravine and into the rainforest.... To this day there is no road there.

My faith statement would be this prayer on June 7, 1996, when I was a Liturgist:

O God of all creation, we thank you for this vibrant earth which you made as a seamless entity, with no frames or boundaries or divisions.

We are grateful for fresh air and clean water, for woodlands and farmlands.

Help us to tread softly as we walk this good earth, and to know that each step we take makes a difference to others, even to the ant underfoot.

Keep alive in us a sense of wonder - for the mystery of seeds, for the magic of fireflies, for the intricacies of a columbine.

In the Native American tradition, keep us mindful of the seventh generation as we go about our daily tasks; for being good stewards of your creation **now** will ensure that there **are** seven generations to come, and seven more after that.

O God, life is such a privilege. And yet so many of our sisters and brothers suffer.

We think of those whose air is polluted, who have no clean water to drink, whose woodlands have been cut down, whose farmlands have been taken over.

And we are reminded of all those who have been used for others' interests and who are not in control of their own destinies, whose very lives are in jeopardy - our sisters and brothers whose heads are too bowed down for wonder.

Help us, dear God, to recognize our complicity, unintentional as it may be, in their plight.

Give us the strength to relinquish our privilege that is gained at the expense of others, and to let go of whatever we hold that is more than we need. Help us to walk with and to learn from our sisters and brothers and to make their struggle our own.

And, God, help us to open our lives to your purpose - knowing that Jesus, your Son, was put to death for His radical compassion; and that we are called as individuals, as church, as community, to walk with Him.