

A Memorial Minute for Eden Elizabeth Parker Grace

“On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month, and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.”

Revelation 22:2 *NRSV*

Eden Grace was a generous, fearless, and profoundly ecumenical public Friend who dedicated her life to a transformative ministry of reconciliation. Eden truly did walk cheerfully over the earth, greeting that of God in everyone she met, listening deeply to them, and sharing in response her Christian faith, progressive values, historical study of Quaker and Christian theology, and unshakeable message of encouragement and love. Consistently and indefatigably, Eden brought her reconciling approach and capability to every organization and challenge.

LIFE & EDUCATION

Eden Parker was born on November 23, 1968 in Cambridge, Massachusetts to Lisa Frederick Parker and Lawrence (Larry) Parker. She and her sister, Wendy, grew up in Concord and Belmont, Mass. She was a resident of Ocean Park, Maine when she died.

In 1991, Eden married James (Jim) Thurston Condict under the care of Beacon Hill Meeting, both adding the surname Grace to their names. They had two sons, Isaiah Grace and Jesse Grace. They also joyfully accepted the invitation for Jim to be a known donor for some dear lesbian friends to become the biological father of M Stefan Walker and Serafina Walker. Later, Achieng Agutu and Justin Campbell each came to live with the Graces as teenagers, and became part of the Grace family along with remaining part of their families of origin. Eden and Jim opened their house in Medford, Mass. to friends who needed temporary housing, and had guests frequently stay with them when they lived in Kenya and Indiana. In Maine, they welcomed both individual guests and Quaker groups for retreats. Eden reveled in entertaining friends and extended family, and found that she was called to the ministry of hospitality.

Eden graduated from Concord Academy in 1986 and received a Bachelor of Arts degree in theater from Brown University in 1992. She received a Masters of Divinity from Episcopal Divinity School in 2001 along with an International Mission and Ecumenism certificate from the Boston Theological Institute. In the fall of 2022, Eden started a PhD program with the University of Birmingham (UK) through the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, intending to write a thesis on "Decolonizing Quaker Mission." From 2020 to 2022, Eden and Jim cared for Eden's mother Lisa at their home in Maine, until Lisa's death from Corticobasal Degeneration. This choice removed Eden from much of her work in public ministry. As her sister Wendy recalls, "It was a huge sacrifice for her, and another example of her incredible generosity and service to those she loved."

QUAKER JOURNEY

Beacon Hill Meeting and New England Yearly Meeting

Eden discovered Quakerism at the age of 13, when a school friend brought her along to a First Day School Committee meeting at Cambridge Friends Meeting; that friend remembers that Eden was eager to make a good impression, and dressed up in heels and makeup for the occasion. After participating in the meeting's lively program for middle-school-aged children, Eden became part of the New England Yearly Meeting Young Friends program and remained actively involved in NEYM from then on. Among other roles over her lifetime, she served as co-clerk of the yearly meeting's Young Adult Friends group from 1988 to 1989; as presiding clerk of Permanent Board from 2003 to 2004; and as a member of the New England Yearly Meeting *Faith & Practice* Revision Committee from 2020 until her death in 2023. From 1993 to 1996, Eden joined the NEYM staff as an administrative associate. At NEYM's 2009 annual sessions, she delivered the Bible Half Hour messages, beginning with the themes of Jubilee as rest and restoration, and concluding with Jesus and the prophetic tradition.

During their honeymoon in 1991, Eden and Jim attended the Friends World Committee for Consultation World Conference of Friends in Chavakali, Kenya, where they heard a powerful message from Miriam Were calling on Friends to turn to Christ to heal the divisions among us. This message, supported by other parts of the conference, had a profound impact on Eden and started her on a journey of Christian faith that continued and grew. It was a turning point that set the stage for her subsequent study of theology, passion for Christian unity, and vocation as a Friends' minister.

In 1992, Eden and six other NEYM Young Adult Friends formed the Free Grace Undying Love Full Gospel Quaker Choir Sing and Be Saved, an *a cappella* group that was to become another demonstration of her spiritual gift of kinship. When it came to comfort with singing about Jesus, the members of the choir reflected the full diversity of Friends in New England, but Eden's confidence preaching the Gospel — even before her career as a public Friend was underway — helped the group learn that sometimes Friends could sing words that they couldn't say.

Why and how did this living witness come to encourage and then initiate the ministries of reconciliation for which she is remembered? In many ways, Eden's remarkable witness can be traced to the beginning of her Quaker journey. Not long after joining Beacon Hill Friends Meeting in 1990, she began identifying as a Christian Friend in the heart of this unprogrammed, historically non-Christocentric Quaker meeting — sharing the joy of her growing faith which was not inconsistent with her feminism, her bisexual identity, and her regard and respect for the faith journeys of others, but in fact undergirded and supported these qualities. During the years of Eden's presence in the meeting, she was part of a core of Friends who were both openly gay or bisexual, and also openly Christian. These Friends' solidarity with each other was inextricable from their deep loyalty to the meeting as a whole, and from their care for the exacting traditions

of unprogrammed worship; they were a great light among us, and a source of support to Eden as she began to explore her calling.

Over time, as Eden became recognized as a leader, she drew on her own life and faith as examples of God's power to reconcile. Her courageous witness in each place she called home required sacrifices but yielded rich rewards, as her living testimony to our capacity to be one united Quaker movement kept hearts open to her message in many unlikely places.

Yet even as Eden traveled and her ministry far from Boston deepened, her active relationship with her home meeting dwindled, due to several factors — among them her own uneven care for the regular communication and visits that would have kept her better connected; BHFMs' lack of unity to formally record ministers, which foreclosed this option for Eden and was a source of lasting sorrow for her; and Friends' diminishing ability, in our meeting as in others, to fully staff committees. Nevertheless, there were times when Eden's ministry was a direct and welcomed gift to her home meeting, and also times when BHFMs provided real support to Eden and the Grace family.

Friends United Meeting

When Beacon Hill Meeting received a letter from another Friends meeting with very different social values, Eden volunteered to help draft a response. This kindled an interest in reconciling differences among Friends, and led her to become involved with Friends United Meeting (FUM). Eden was a member of the FUM General Board from 1993 to 2002, serving on its Finance Committee, contributing to FUM's review and reaffirmation of its ecumenical commitments, and facilitating the creation of the Ecumenical Relations Task Group.

In 2004, Eden and Jim moved with Isaiah and Jesse to Kisumu, Kenya to found FUM's Africa Ministries Office together with John Muhanji as the director. As FUM field staff, Eden had a special heart for the most vulnerable. She was instrumental in establishing the Girl Child Education program in Turkana and Samburu, to enable girls to complete their secondary education and increase their life skills for themselves and their future families, instead of early marriage. When a meeting of Kenyan Quaker leaders was about to be canceled due to post-election violence in 2007, Eden strongly encouraged them instead to meet and repurpose the meeting to discern their response to the violence and resulting trauma. Out of that meeting was born the Friends Church Peace Team, which has since trained thousands of Kenyans in Alternatives to Violence, Healing and Rebuilding our Communities, trauma healing, nonviolent social change, transformative mediation, and more.

Eden closely supervised the administration of the Friends Hospital in Kaimosi and worked with the Friends Lugulu Mission Hospital on building staff housing and other projects. She was an ambassador for FUM throughout East Africa. She worked tirelessly to plan and host mission trips and conferences, and attended to the physical and spiritual needs of foreign visitors to Kenya, she and Jim often hosting them in their home.

From 2013 to 2020 Eden served as FUM's Global Ministries Director based in Richmond, Indiana. In this role, she encouraged and nurtured new leadership in FUM, especially by women, and maintained and expanded FUM's ministry of spiritual renewal and service to marginalized people. One volunteer recalls, "After returning from years in Kenya to her position in global ministry at FUM, Eden developed a compelling vision of the unfolding future of the Religious Society of Friends around the world and in North America especially."

West Richmond Friends Meeting

When the Graces returned to the U.S. and made Richmond, Indiana their home, they became active in West Richmond Friends Meeting and remained so after they moved to Maine in 2020. Friends there recall that "she had a broad sense of what worship could be... and so she cared for every aspect of meeting for worship at West Richmond. She gave significant vocal ministry, both in prepared messages and out of the silence; she lent her soprano voice to the choir; and she served on our Worship Committee. Particularly in that group, she encouraged us to expect more from ourselves and from God in our time together: to truly seek the presence of the Divine, and not to be satisfied with routine." She gave special support and encouragement to young women exploring a call to ministry, or who might be nudged in that direction, and helped oversee the Richmond Young Friends youth program, in which Jesse found spiritual community and encouragement.

Ecumenical Eden

Friends Committee on National Legislation

From 2018 until shortly before her death in 2023, Eden served in governance roles for the Friends Committee on National Legislation, whose work she loved and championed. She is particularly remembered for diving in on a revision of the organization's bylaws, a form of service that became something of an Eden specialty. FCNL's general secretary during this period remembers: "Eden had a spiritual presence, a force of energy that could be both serious and playful — her energy attracted people to her. Eden's love of God and her ability to convey how God loves humans inspired us. She was a woman of faith who made Quaker life more vibrant for all those who knew her."

Massachusetts Council of Churches

While studying at Episcopal Divinity School, Eden took courses in constructive theology at Andover Newton Theological School, missiology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and an independent study in Orthodox theology at the Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. Studying at these various schools both resulted from and reinforced her interest in ecumenism.

In the late 1990s, Eden joined the board of the Massachusetts Council of Churches, where she worked with dedication alongside staff and volunteers and studied the history, theory, and practice of the ecumenical movement. This involvement helped open the way for her later involvement with the World Council of Churches.

World Council of Churches

Eden was an appointed FUM delegate to the World Council of Churches 1998 Assembly in Harare, Zimbabwe. In a 2001 keynote address, she described what occurred at the Harare Assembly when 5,000 worshipping Christians from all over the world were gathered under one enormous tent. Tears began to flow "as our bodies moved together, and we were seized by the Holy Spirit" and "we became the body of Christ." Only then came their "baptism by fire" as a fierce thunderstorm began to shake the tent itself. This was Eden's "...point of no return for me on my personal quest for a vision of the reconciled Christian Church." Among the many threads of Eden's life, a bright one connected this transformative experience to her role, years later, as FUM Director of Global Ministries, where her work with Friends in East Africa — who have long struggled with deep cultural, tribal, and theological differences — became a proving ground for her steady, wise, and encouraging leadership. Friends back home in New England, too, were blessed by Eden's powerful encounter in Harare for years afterward through the quality of her participation in Quaker business of all kinds; she never forgot that vision of unity, and was often able, through both silent prayer and spoken ministry, to help those worshipping with her to glimpse it too.

At the Harare Assembly, Eden accepted appointments to the WCC Central Committee (1998-2006) and the Special Commission on Orthodox Participation in the WCC (1999-2001), where she gained a nuanced understanding of Orthodox ecclesiology and ecumenical concerns. She used this understanding to help negotiate successful resolutions to issues raised by the Orthodox member churches, especially in the areas of worship and decision-making. In decision-making, the WCC had been using Robert's Rules of Order, whereas the Orthodox churches had always used a consensus-based approach. Eden contributed to this work a Quaker perspective on voteless decision-making and helped to shape the final proposal from the Commission for the WCC to adopt a consensus-based process, which was approved at the 2006 WCC Assembly in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

At the 2006 Porto Alegre WCC Assembly, and again at the 2013 Assembly in Busan, South Korea, Eden was the minute-taker whose job was to capture the emerging consensus in decision sessions, typing on a computer whose screen was projected on monitors where the thousands of attendees could see every keystroke. In the editing following the sessions she often discussed issues with delegates to formulate clear language for dissenting opinions to the satisfaction of the individuals and churches involved. Sometimes this responsibility required listening and questioning to draw out the nature of the dissent, as well as counseling individuals in distress.

Influence and Legacy

As one Friend summed up simply, “the gift of her presence was awesome. When you were with Eden, you knew that she was fully present with you and seeing things in you that perhaps you had not yet seen yourself. She taught seekers how to be better seekers, she taught students to be better students, she taught choirs to be better choirs, she taught preachers to be better preachers, she taught leaders to be better leaders.”

One of Eden’s longtime FUM colleagues recalled her personal strengths and challenges: “She was fiercely protective of her family, friends, and anyone vulnerable. She encouraged and empowered women and carried great hopes for the Religious Society of Friends, especially her beloved yearly meeting. Eden was challenged to balance her powerful intellect and personality with her tendency to overwork, sometimes frantically, and could occasionally be unconsciously critical of others. She occasionally described herself as a 'bear' or 'bull' when regretting saying or doing something that others found aggressive. Yet as a mother bear, she was protective — of people, matters of justice, good institutions, and meaningful work. And her bullish side also provided moral courage and strength of personality to make a difference in situations where others might be silent or still.”

Eden was a published author and sought-after speaker who delivered keynote addresses and prepared messages to dozens of gatherings of Friends. Much of this work is preserved online, available to seekers and scholars. Her final publication, *On Earth as it is in Heaven: The Kingdom of God and the Yearning of Creation*, was the basis of the 2019 Swarthmore Lecture, and is a synthesis of many themes from her life’s work: acknowledging the frightening scale of the world’s injustice and need; explaining, with erudition and clarity, the applicability of Friends’ core tenets to today’s challenges; lifting up the examples of diverse other ministers; and above all, calling us to surrender our fear and instead trust utterly, joyfully in God.

Eden’s early spiritual life was nourished by her yearly meeting and the wider world of Quakers. Her gift for leadership and vision were grounded not only in Friends’ practices and traditions, but also in the beloved communities that surrounded her. The values of equity and justice in the testimonies Eden learned and witnessed in all these communities surely influenced the hope expressed in her Ph.D. proposal to “decolonize Quaker mission,” a major piece of work she was just getting started on at the time of her death. She planned to trace the roots of settler colonialism in the Kenya mission and explore how we might strive against the internalized “colonialism” that prevents God’s intended right relationship between people and peoples.

All who had the good fortune to hear Friend Eden’s spoken ministry know that she was a praise giver! In her warm and generous spirit, we, too, say Hallelujah! Thank you, thank you, thank you to the Divine Inspirer who both liberated and guided her to serve.

Approved by Beacon Hill Friends Meeting, December 15, 2024