

Jean Margaret McCandless  
(July 26, 1943 - April 27, 2024)

Jean often shared this “Old Quaker Prayer,” adapted from William Penn, with Friends who were grieving:

“We seem to give her back to thee dear Lord, who gavest her to us. Yet as thou didst not lose her in giving, so we have not lost her by her return. For what is thine is ours always; and life is eternal and love is immortal, and what we sometimes call death is only a horizon, and a horizon is nothing but the limit of our sight.”

A fierce advocate for peace and justice, champion of the vulnerable and disadvantaged, skilled therapist, mentor and guide to many individuals and families, coalition and community builder, Jean Margaret McCandless died peacefully at her home across from the meetinghouse in Burlington, Vermont on April 27, 2024.

Born to labor activist Ben Segal and city planner Ruth Urice, Jean was adopted at birth by their friends, educator George Watson and social worker and feminist theologian Elizabeth Grill Watson, newly convinced Quakers who were attracted to the peace and social justice testimonies of Friends. Jean grew up immersed in Quaker thought and action: Elizabeth and George went on to become leading lights of 20<sup>th</sup> century liberal Quakerism, through their writing and activism, leading workshops, traveling, writing and speaking amongst Friends. George became an educational leader at several colleges and universities, including Friends World College, and Elizabeth a respected author and minister.

During Jean’s childhood, the family settled in the majority African-American Hyde Park neighborhood in Chicago, where Jean and her brother John were the only white children in their elementary class. White flight enabled the Watsons to buy Frank Lloyd Wright’s Heller House. The children were taught to tell visitors that the house was ‘the flowering of his prairie style’; they skated on salt down the long hallways, and once spread toothpaste on the banisters. As a conscientious objector during World War II, George’s draft board assigned him alternative service as a janitor in a psychiatric ward, despite the fact that he was a father with three children under age 5. Elizabeth spent the war as a staff member for Jane Addams’ Hull House, modeling engaged community work while of necessity bringing the children with her. Afterward, Elizabeth drew on her experience to offer input into the curriculum, as secretary of the newly formed University of Chicago School of Social Services Administration. Jean later received her Master’s degree there.

Her parents’ lives and work served as patterns and examples to Jean: their commitment to making education broadly accessible, to service, social work, justice--and to ongoing revelation, throughout their lives, to care for all who are children of God. Her early years were steeped in Quaker thought and action, learning the essentials of equality, justice, hospitality and love. The family settled in the majority African-American Hyde Park neighborhood in Chicago, where Jean and her brother were sometimes the only white children in their elementary class. White flight

enabled the Watsons to buy Frank Lloyd Wright's Heller House. The four Watson children were taught to tell admiring visitors that the house was 'the flowering of Wright's Prairie style'; they skated on salt down the long hallways, and once spread toothpaste along the stately banisters. The local chapter of the Committee on Racial Equality gathered in the family's basement.

As a young woman, Jean attended Scattergood Friends School, where she loved to dance and tumble and edited the school paper. She successfully led the campaign to convince her parents to adopt three German sisters, the three Watson sisters' penpals, after the girls were orphaned in their teens. After an English degree from Grinnell College, she obtained her master's in Social Work Administration from University of Chicago School of Social Services Administration. She met Christopher McCandless through their active leadership in Young Friends of North America during the sixties and early seventies, organizing national gatherings and workcamps. Sparks flew, initially over a disagreement on a point of Quaker doctrine and practice. They married in the shadow of the 1968 Chicago Democratic Convention's protests.

Jean created beautiful stained glass panels, sometimes installed alongside Christopher's fine woodworking. Some of her work still hangs in her home. With Christopher, she took part in civil disobedience, acting as a marshall in Civil Rights and peace demonstrations, and helping to organize humanitarian aid to North Vietnam, though it was Christopher who helped to deliver Thanksgiving dinner to American Indian Movement members during their occupation of Alcatraz Island. The bond the two formed, the family they created together, grew ever stronger as time passed and they advocated for their children and community.

Much of Jean's calling in the world—her ministry—was in fierce advocacy and service, centering the wellbeing of the marginalized and amplifying their voices and power. Jean worked with children, families and elders for over 60 years. In her professional life she developed and ran statewide programs that supported foster children, the elderly, people with disabilities, farmers and farmworkers. She was stalwart in providing safety, space, and support for those who had been abused or underserved. As the first executive director of the Burlington-area shelter for survivors of intimate partner violence, Jean gave out dragonslayer awards to those who had taken on particularly daunting challenges. She herself insistently integrated creative, trauma-informed approaches to build capacity for self-advocacy and independence, in her own family and in her work.

A tireless coalition-builder, in the last dozen years of her career Jean worked to integrate agricultural medicine into Vermont's system of primary care by creating and leading the Vermont Farm Health and Safety Coalition. She insisted that the Coalition include those serving the wellbeing not just of farmers, but also of farmworkers. That and other cross-fertilizations the coalition fostered broadened and deepened services and safety for those working in Vermont agriculture. The trainings she designed and delivered with nationwide experts inform the backbone of the Milk with Dignity Code of Conduct, an equitable labor code that protects hundreds of Vermont farmworkers each day.

In our Society she worked tirelessly to support children's and adults' learning and inclusion, both in our monthly meeting and in New England Yearly Meeting. She loved our meeting's library, frequently rolling out selections of books before worship to tempt worshipers, as well as being the moving force behind a delightful and expansive Children and Family bookstore at Yearly Meeting Sessions. She served on and clerked many Yearly and Monthly Meeting committees. Whether as Session's clerk, co-coordinating Yearly Meeting anchor groups, sitting on Permanent Board, offering workshops with Christopher throughout the Yearly Meeting on youth and adult religious education, facilitating the inclusion of children with special needs at Sessions, or redistributing Quaker resources in her co-leadership of the Legacy Gift Committee, Jean always had an eye on providing places where Spirit could thrive.

We have an enduring image of Jean's hospitality, even during the pandemic, as her memory was failing. At the close of meeting in the parking lot on cold winter mornings, wool hat pulled snugly, she would be smiling broadly while handing out hot cider and encouraging conversation. As in the Psalm she helped First Day School children to dramatically act out:

If I take the wings of the morning,  
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;  
Even there shall thy hand lead me,  
And thy right hand shall hold me. (Psalm 139:9-10)

We grieve Jean's passing even as the echoes of her presence continue to reverberate. Jean's ministry lives on—in our library, in our First Day School, and whenever we share food and a bit of conversation after worshipping together. We are so grateful for her; we are so blessed. Her passing, so soon after Christopher, reunites their combined energies, restored undimmed in a joyful burst into the universe. May we draw on it to help sustain our own fierce commitments to nurture communities in the service of peace and justice.

Approved Burlington Monthly Meeting, 19 May 2024

Accepted by Northwest Quarterly Meeting, June 2, 2024