

An Interview with Betsy Emerick

by Hannah Maximova, October 2005

H: From the little I know about your life history, it sounds like your relationship with education has been profound. Want to talk about it?

B: I never had a plan for what I was going to do with my life, and I've often said I don't have a career path, I have a series of detours. Jud and I got married the summer after we graduated from Hope College in Holland, Michigan, where both of my grandfathers went as well as my parents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. I didn't really catch fire while I was there, except toward the very end, right before I graduated and had to leave.

Jud started graduate school in Art History at the University of Michigan. I took a really crappy job as a sort of secretary. Then I eventually managed to get hired as an assistant editor for a group that helped scientists edit their papers for publication. I really enjoyed it, and I got to know a guy who later hired me to be a writer/editor in Cleveland for a group that was writing a social sciences curriculum for elementary schools. Another writer, a very interesting self-educated, and self-proclaimed royalist from Canada and I were writing a third-grade social science textbook which we called *The Making of Anglo-America*. At least we recognized that there was an Anglo-America! I worked on the Westward Movement part of the book and did a lot of research which was great fun, reading pioneer diaries and so on.

It was a fairly politically conservative place, and my colleague and I had a gigantic fight over what was going to be on the cover of this book. He wanted a picture of the Minuteman statue in Concord, MA, and I said over my dead body were we going to have that! This was during the Vietnam War after all. And I won. We had a photograph of a pioneer family--a woman, her husband and the children standing in front of a sod hut--it was really a great photograph. But at the end of that year Jud got a fellowship to the University of Pennsylvania.

This was the story of my early adult life—it seemed I'd get into something just in time for us to get uprooted and off we would go. Then I'd have to go find something else. By working on the textbook I'd gotten interested in teaching, which I'd thought was the absolute last thing I would ever want to do with an English major (that was my third major in college, and the only one I finished).

But I looked for a teaching job and managed to get hired to teach second grade at Girard College, a private school for poor white fatherless boys. I had no experience whatsoever, had no idea what I was doing and it was quite nerve-wracking! But people were very helpful and after struggling along, I actually really liked it, and it was a great experience.

But this was in the late 60's and this school was very conservative politically. The day after Martin Luther King was shot was sort of the last straw for me. I went to school the next day, walked into the teachers' lounge and this other teacher looked at me and said, "What's wrong?" I said, "Didn't you hear what happened?" And she said, "What?" I said, "Martin Luther King was

killed!” And she said, “Well, he certainly stirred up a lot of trouble.” And I said, “Well, I think it was trouble that needed stirring up!”

I had already applied for a new program at Penn to get a MS in urban education. As part of this, I taught English and reading in an inner-city middle school in West Philly. I really loved working there and was set to teach in a predominantly black high school in North Philadelphia when Jud finished his PhD course work and got a fellowship to go study in Europe. Here I was launched on yet another career which was going to be interrupted, but travelling was something I had always wanted to do and I was eager to go. We ended up living in Europe for four years, the first nine months in Munich and the rest in Rome. The minute I set foot in Italy I just loved it. And it’s become, for both of us, our second home.

I got a job teaching English to Italians for a year or so and then started working as a research assistant to a famous retired art historian, Richard Krautheimer. He called himself Jud’s art-historical grandfather because he’d been Jud’s teacher’s teacher. Working with him was a marvelous experience. I’d walk through the center of Rome every day to the State Archives, where I was reading 17th-century documents, looking for things.

Oh, it was just, it was heaven. I’d had the experience teaching, which I really valued, but I’d been very frustrated at Penn because I had to take all these education courses, which weren’t very intellectually challenging. So the research I did in Rome convinced me that I wanted to go back to graduate school to study literature.

Unfortunately, when we left Italy and moved to California, I had to spend a year sitting around being miserable because I couldn’t afford out-of-state tuition. Eventually I went to UCLA and entered the Comparative Literature program, which allowed me to do work in Italian and English, American Lit, and I did a minor in French in the end. This went on for a number of years because we...well, we kept going back to Italy, for one thing.

I got into a real slump in terms of writing my dissertation. I think a lot of it had to do with not wanting to face the problem of what I would do when I finished. The job market was terrible for humanities PhDs by then, so this was where I was for a number of years and really pretty unhappy.

Eventually a job came up at Pitzer. It was a one-year, temporary sort of job, working as an assistant to the Dean of Faculty and the Dean of Students. I applied, thinking if I got some administrative experience, that would be useful somewhere, somehow, sometime. Meanwhile, I was still struggling with my dissertation.

I worked at Pitzer for six years and ended up being the Associate Dean of Students by the end. At that point a new Dean was hired, and he and I pretty much hated each other on sight. That was when UCLA told me to either finish my dissertation or retake my PhD exams. That was enough incentive and I got an unpaid leave from Pitzer. While I was away my job was reclassified as an entry-level position, which is a classic technique for getting rid of somebody--I’ve used it myself! And so there I was. I went out on the job market and looked around. There wasn’t anything local.

Fortunately, I got a job at Reed in Portland, Oregon, in a new experimental position as Dean of First-Year Students. I worked for the Dean of Faculty, and the Dean of Students. I ended up staying there for four years, during a very tumultuous time for the College.

Jud still lived here--we decided that we could do the commuting thing. It was difficult, and yet I really had to do it. I felt like I had to have the freedom and the space to see what I could do and to find a job at last that really used all of what I could bring to it. Jud was very worried about my going off. But I used to say, the worst thing for our marriage would be if I didn't get a job, not if I got a job somewhere else.

Four years passed at Reed. At the end, though I felt like I could have stayed, there was still work to be done, I'd hit a kind of ceiling there. There wasn't any place for me to go, which is pretty much the case for administrators in academia: you have to move to move up.

I really wanted to be a dean. I'd decided I loved working at small private colleges because you weren't slotted into a narrow area. I was hired at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and it was right place for me. So I moved to Pennsylvania and ended up staying there for eight years.

It was a terrific experience. Certainly not easy—being a dean is a 24-hour, 7-day-a-week job. There are lots of issues you have to deal with, including students dying. Really tough things. I also had a faculty appointment. I taught in the English department, regular courses, just one a year usually because I couldn't do more than that; it was too much work. That was just a wonderful time. I felt that I had found what I'd been looking for many, many years, in a place whose values I supported and with which I felt completely in tune.

That kind of gets through my educational career. Except, then we got a new president at Dickinson, and I had had breast cancer in 1996, which made me think about a lot of things. Jud and I had been apart, commuting, for 12 years by then. We had been able to spend long periods of time together; we'd have three months in the summers, and when he was on sabbatical, we'd spend nine months at a time together, a couple of other times a whole year. That made a huge difference in the commuting part. But I decided I didn't want to look for another job. It would have meant moving to another place and finding yet another community, and at this point it was important for us to be together.

Having cancer was part of that decision. It was just astonishing how people gathered around, and helped. I suppose that shouldn't be surprising, but it was. And it was so gratifying and made such an enormous difference to me. I think for the first time I felt like I was part of a community. Jud was able to be with me a lot of the time, too; the summer when I had chemo, he was there the whole time.

So I negotiated with Dickinson, took early retirement, and came back to California. I did teach at Pomona the first three semesters, one course each semester, which was really nice for transition. But I had also started doing some writing and taking some writing courses at UCLA. I wanted to be serious about writing and have the time to do that. So I stopped teaching. Now I have a writing coach, and I'm writing a memoir about our first years living in Rome.

So, how did I end up at Orange Grove? When I went back East, I went to some Quaker meetings and I thought, yes, it seems like something I want to explore. And having cancer, clichéd as it is, it does make you think that you shouldn't put things off, because who knows?

So I decided when I came back to California to look for a Meeting. I found Orange Grove meeting online and it's the right place. It's the right spiritual focus, structure, the right values, the right people, the right... It feels like home. That's been really a great thing for me, and for both of us, I think.

Then, last fall, along came the Afghan Refugee Girls' School project. When Edith Cole got sick, I got the e-mail the Committee sent out asking for help. And I just said, "This is what I want to do. I know I want to do this."

I love to travel, and in that sense it's a great adventure. But it's also just such a wonderful project, educating girls who have such limited opportunities. The challenges of working in Pakistan, trying to understand what's happening, dealing with the enormous cultural differences, and all that are just really compelling. So there I am. Long answer!

H: Did you two not want to have children?

B: No, we wanted to have children. But we kept, you know, we put it off, put it off, put it off, because we were doing all these other things... When we decided the time had come, it didn't happen. We really didn't ever consider adopting a child. That just didn't seem to be the right thing for us. So, yeah, we would have loved to have children, but we didn't. So we've been very close to our niece and nephew on my side, who live in Northern California.

H: If your ten-year-old self were here would she recognize you as a later version of her?

B: I think she'd be pretty surprised! Because, you know, my life has followed a huge social change for this culture and this country. Because of going to graduate school and traveling and living abroad the way we did, we had this sort of prolonged adolescence. This meant also that instead of being completely formed by the 50's and the early 60's, we were also on that kind of divide between what was the 50's and what became the culture of the late 60's. That really affected us both and changed who we were.

We got married right after college, as did most of my friends. But our lives went in a somewhat different direction than a lot of people I knew. The expectation was that I would get married and live in a nice suburban town and raise a family.

H: Well I think this has been really interesting. Anything else you'd like to add?

B: Yes, how important Quakerism is to me now, and how, even though I've been attending for four years, I guess, I still feel I'm very new at it. On the other hand, I can't imagine not being involved, and I'm sure this is going to be important for the rest of my life. The more I think about the world and where we are today and what we all try to do, I feel I need that ground to stand on.