

Quakerism & Mysticism

An interview with Sharon Doyle by Hannah Maximova

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Sharon Doyle was born in *The Catcher in the Rye*, adolcesed in *The Last Picture Show*, and moved to Washington, D.C., just in time for the Great Society. Concurrently, she was born in New Jersey, moved to a Texas small town and later moved to Washington, D.C. It was there that she met her husband with whom she moved to California and had three children—Drew, Nick and Fee, all artists and wondrous people. Her BA and MFA are from Cornell and she has written for the theater, PBS, and network and cable television. She now teaches writing at USC and Chapman.

Hannah: Does any moment come to mind when you became conscious of a profundity beyond your normal life? Whatever comes to mind.

Sharon: Well three things come to mind. I'll go backwards: the last was when I was a writer for PBS and I was doing a series on the future. I had gotten assigned the *Aquarian Conspiracy* part of the future.

Hannah: *Aquarian Conspiracy*?

Sharon: It's a book from the early 80's. Old people will know what I'm talking about. (laughs) The group we were doing the documentary on was an offshoot of Findhorn in western Massachusetts and were called the Sirius Community—Sirius like the star, not the feeling.

The documentary was to be called “The Coming Transformation.” It was that part of the Futurist movement (yes, there really is such a thing) which believes that there will be a transformation in society, like a crystallization. The new society will rise out of the disintegration of the old. They were doing intentional living which included group meditation twice daily. They were trying to integrate their lives so that everything sort of meant something.

And of course, being from Findhorn, they were mystics. They would talk to their strawberries before they picked them, thanking them. They'd also talk to the deer about not eating the strawberries. They planted their herbs in a circle to increase their power.

At the time I came to visit them, they had been visualizing a sofa for one of the houses, and while I was there it showed up. (laughs) Someone in Boston had spontaneously donated one. They were all sort of standing around this living room, around this blue flowered sofa, commenting on how different or how alike it was to what they had been seeing. So these were mystics who were very kind of, well, practical about it.

Well, I was a good reporter, so I meditated with them. I had been attending Quaker Meeting pretty steadily at that time. I had begun to get intimations of something other than the beauty of

the silence. And then I got hit with...all I can describe it as is a flood of light...a conversion experience. And it went on and on.

I remember my left brain, my rational side, saying "It's the way you're sitting. It's the crook in your neck." And then finally that side had to be quiet. Because it was just true, what was going on with me, and it was just wonderful. A flood of light. Blasted away by light. And with it a sense of sheer power and great joy. Sheer joy in existence. I immediately carried it back to the Friends Meeting in DC.

I had worshipped with the Quakers a couple of times when I was in Pittsburgh while my husband was in law school. I took it back to Quaker Meeting and promptly had the same experience again. So that was terrific. Terrifying. Awful. Awe-full, filled with awe and trembling. I had no one else to go to with this but the Quakers because I'd long ago come to believe that Westerners can approach Eastern religions but can't quite embrace them. We have our own traditions of mysticism.

So I went to the Quakers and periodically still have the experience. Less so recently because I'm not as focused. I'm looking forward to being older and being less preoccupied with details and the "monkey mind" as Elmyra calls it. CUP's and lists and ad hoc committees. Sometimes I think we should lay everything down but the Meeting for Worship, but that's for another interview.

At any rate, over the years of getting flooded, getting in this state has taught me many things and brought me to some conclusions about God and what He-She's like. The thing that my experience teaches me is that all the forms of God are masks that human beings create so that they can deal with God. The more attention you pay to a mask, the more detailed it gets.

But the real thing, the power behind it all is immense and impersonal and just huge—awe-full. Truly awe-full. We can't deal with it for long, it blasts us away, all our small human concerns of living and dying, so we make these masks. To me, the forms of the religions are there so that people can go about their daily lives and have a nice meal, work....

A neat, convenient religion that has rules and that kind of stuff to let you know where you stand. It's contained. It doesn't blast you away and take over your life. So I've always liked it that the Quakers are suspicious of form, that they let Spirit take over.

But let me go back to the second thing--when I was 13. I grew up Episcopalian, and we had a very fervent church and had what they called the "Midnight Watch" during the Passion. On Maundy Thursday, the Eucharist would be put on the altar, and people would go in on an hourly basis and guard it, I guess, and pray, until Easter morning services.

We were assigned three o'clock in the morning, which when you're 13 is kind of cool. Get up in the middle of the night with your parents and go to this empty silent church. It made a big impression on me. And it occurs to me now that it may have been the first time I'd ever been in a church where there wasn't some kind of noise—music, praying, singing. It was very, very silent.

I remember spending that whole hour asking for some kind of a response: anything. So that night really had been my beginning of a conscious quest, wanting an answer. As I grew older, I became more and more impatient with all the talking, all the preaching, all the noise. I can recite

the Morning Prayer and the Eucharist from memory, and I find the hour to be interminable. I just start squirming, as opposed to a silent hour of worship, which is deliciously endless.

Now let me go back one more step, deeper into my childhood. I remember once I was walking down Exeter Way, which was the street I lived on, and it was one of those days after a thunderstorm, and the clouds were very billowy. Maybe I was seven. I was walking with my head back, staring at the clouds and being kind of knocked out by them. Then suddenly there was this swift movement—just a flash really—and there was an angel staring at me. It was one of those things...and he was laughing, and (snaps) it was gone. I had that kind of thing, sort of odd moments. We're a family who believes in ghosts. My grandmother was a faith healer. She was one of those women from that whole charismatic movement that happened in the '20s. And she went from church to church, whichever church she felt like going to. So she kinda clued me in that I could expect a response. I didn't take it seriously and didn't tell anybody. I had a big imagination. I always had to have my closet closed and check under my bed at night. And I thought I was just seeing things, you know? But I never forgot it.

The conscious search for an experience of God, it really began that Thursday night in the Midnight Watch. And it really was answered, and I guess I must have been almost 30. But in between there was a falling away. And yet, I think that falling away was a preparation.

I went into theater very seriously when I was in college. I had stopped going to church. During that time I was having a love affair with Friedrich Nietzsche, and I didn't want to have anything to do with God, so I poured it all into theater. And during the late '60s and early '70s there was a whole religious theater movement, which included no sets, no costumes. I was much too pure for Broadway. We did a lot of improvisation together, and I always found that the best improvisations came when you started with people breathing together in absolute silence, listening. So I was kind of preparing for silent worship for a long time. The path was being prepared.

Then I got married and started having children and became a writer. I stopped doing theater and had nowhere to go with all that spiritual energy. So I when I found myself kinda miserable and alone in Pittsburgh, while my husband was off being obsessed with becoming a lawyer, I started attending Quaker Meeting.

H: So how would you say you bring the experience of divinity that you've had into your daily life? Or do you seek to?

S: Well there are two things. First of all I'm a writer. So I have to believe in the worlds I'm creating, and I have to let my fingers do my thinking, get into the flow of the world and the voice of the character, so there's a part of me who is absolutely trying to unhinge and get myself lost in my imagination. And that relates to my experience of divinity. That's when I'm cooking, to borrow a term from jazz. I think all artists share this. Musicians, painters, potters, dancers, actors—when the self doesn't interfere with the flow and we really don't know who's playing the instrument, whether the instrument is ourselves, or a physical one like a paint brush or a clarinet. And getting to that point is a balance between the discipline, the technique, and the flow.

I always tell my writing students that they have to pay attention to structure, to the forms. They have to do their exercises at the barre, their *tendus* and their *changements* (from ballet). But then they have to find a way through that and get back to just dancing. Then they look at me funny and ask whether the first plot point comes on page 15.

But when it comes to going to church, it's interesting because I'm one of those sort of annoying people who like to be surprised by it. There are times when I go on retreats when I'm consciously following a discipline and quieting it all down and seeking out the experience. But mostly I prefer to be just sitting there listening and let God surprise me. The thing that keeps me true is my engagement in the community. I'm engaged with people who are also seeking that experience.

For a long time, the first few years I was in Quaker Meeting, I was concentrating on quieting the body. You do have to do that; you do have to develop some discipline. Often some of the most profound people are just sitting there and letting go and letting God or whatever. They aren't pumping themselves up. That's the whole problem that the people who are consciously seeking a religious experience get into: their control over their experience. I like to keep it pragmatic. Simple. Waiting. Listening.

Something I remember from being with the Sirius community is once we'd gone for a walk and had lain down next to a pond in the middle of the woods. This was right next to the Berkshires. I did the meditation thing but didn't know what the hell I was doing. I was with two of the leaders of the community who basically supported the community financially by doing workshops all over the world. They came out of the meditation, and one said to the other, "Where did you go?" and the other answered, "I went over to Shasta." "Oh. I hadn't thought about that," she said. "The energy there is really young. Not like here." These people are totally pragmatic. One time they're astral projecting, and the other they're focusing on a couch that's supposed to show up, and both things are the same.

H: Would you say that your life is directed or changed in any way by being the granddaughter of a faith healer?

S: I don't know. My parents picked up and moved me to Texas when I was 11, and I didn't see her much after that. My dad was a doctor, and he was the first in his family to be educated beyond high school. So, science was the way to heal people in our family. My main memory of my grandmother as a healer was the night that she tried to pray me out of a headache. It went on and on and all I wanted was an aspirin. (laughs)

I knew what I needed, but she didn't have any of that in the house. She lived in this spooky old Victorian house. The funny thing is that actually my faith orientation came mostly from my dad, who was a very religious person. He was on the vestry; we sang in the choir together.

One of the things my parents did in my childhood was buy a house on a lake in New Hampshire. And we had just moved in, our first summer, when we heard that there was an abandoned church on the top of the island, so we went to look for it. We found it, and there was a 'For Sale' sign on it.

My parents thought about buying it. I think the seller wanted \$3,000 for this hand-built stone chapel in the middle of the wilderness. Instead, my parents ended up organizing a group of

friends and having services on Sundays. That was like an organizing thing of my summers, being part of that church. Still is; I'm on the board. But it was always non-denominational, well, non-denominational Christian, although recently a Buddhist/New Age-type minister showed up. It was always about finding God in Nature.

H: When you say that your family believes in ghosts, how does that affect your daily life? Or how has it ever affected your life?

S: My little sister sees them. My mom always talked about her mom saying, "Oh, that's Kathleen," whenever a certain door slammed shut in our house.

I think my first encounter with a ghost was in a graveyard in Ithaca, New York, with a friend of mine. I felt like I had let something in and wasn't quite sure what to do about it. So, I asked him (his name was Edward) to go away. When I first started going to Quaker Meeting, interestingly enough, my first connection with someone was a woman who told me that she had been passing a graveyard and a spirit had invaded her. She had gone home and written this woman's story. She said she realized that she couldn't leave herself open because there were too many hungry spirits out there. All the time I'm talking about this, I'm not really believing it, it's just sort of fun. Like the angel who smiled at me on Exeter Way.

But then I was staying at the apartment of a friend of mine who had died suddenly. This was during a period of my life when having five dollars in my bank account was a big deal. I was commuting between Washington and New York, trying to be an actress, and things were tight.

I had been crashing on this friend's floor, and his mom said it was perfectly all right for me to stay until the estate was settled. So I stayed there, and the first night I had this incredibly realistic dream. I was sitting with my friend, and we had this really long talk about everything that was unresolved between us. Then he kissed me goodbye, and we kind of melted together. I didn't think about it too much, but it was one of those really realistic dreams. I could swear it was actually happening.

The next day I went out for a walk and ran into another friend of his who was looking kind of strange. She said she had had a dream the last night in which our friend had come to her too. She'd had the same dream I'd had. I figured he was going around and saying goodbye to everybody. I don't know what that sort of experience means, but it does tend to convince me that there is a residual energy of personality that hangs together, especially after an abrupt death.

After my dad died, he was just gone. He was so ready to get out of here. When my mom died, it was like she didn't know she was dead. You could go out to the little house where she'd lived for the last years of her life, and you could smell her. Talcum powder, sherry, and Chanel Number 5 – a very particular smell. I think if they aren't ready to go into the whatever it is, light, get blasted away, they wander around. Now I feel stupid. I'm married to the rational man of the universe, and he doesn't believe any of it.

H: What attracted you to him?

S: He'd read as much Nietzsche and Plato as I had. Nietzsche said you should marry a woman for her conversation because it's the only thing that lasts. It's true for men too.

H: Good conversation but no ghosts?

S: We were in Peru once and had just seen Machu Picchu, which was something we'd talked about doing since the beginning of our marriage. We finally got there after 26 years or so. We were hiking and postulating about who the Incas were, what they did, and how their cosmology was realized in their architecture, and I realized that that's the conversation we have wherever we are. We're always in mini-archeology/philosophy conversations. And I bring my imagination, he brings his sense of history, and we sort of put that together. We have some very cool kids, too, and we do like to laugh a lot.

H: Would you say your experience of marriage has deepened your spirituality or no?

S: I don't know. I had no idea when I married him that I was marrying a Republican. He had no idea that I was going to disappear every Sunday for the next 20 years. I hadn't known that either. His religion is politics and the public good. Who knows? I think my marriage and my spirituality are different worlds. Which makes me a little sad, although we do celebrate the solstice and take that pretty seriously, the whole God in Nature thing.

On the other hand, we do share a very strong sense of ethics. He's a Stoic, really. We both believe in fairness, justice, the law, self-control, generosity, modesty, simplicity, those kinds of things—the morality of things we don't even have to discuss. We used to have a joke about it: The Forces of Light. Of course, at the time we met, Richard Nixon was being impeached, and it was easy to tell who the enemy was.

One of the things I always have to explain to Quakers is how I can stay married to a Republican. As I said, he wasn't a Republican when I met him; he was and still is a Deadhead and a fan of Bluegrass. When I met him, he had just finished getting himself on Nixon's "Enemies List" for working against Nixon for re-election. (He worked for Pete McCloskey.) He is a back-bencher.

He hasn't been happy with a single Republican President that I can make out. We went to all the Reagan anti-inaugurals. And he's furious that the Party has been hijacked by conservatives because he's what they used to call a Liberal Republican. Don't laugh. And of course, our children have grown up listening to us argue everything from El Salvador to my persistent tree-hugging.

But all that doesn't really matter to me because I grew up apolitical in Washington, DC. And there are two things that are true in Washington, DC: one is that every four years the government changes; the second thing is that there are people with power there. Some of them are Republicans; some of them are Democrats; a couple of them are Independents. But no matter what their party, either people use their power for what they see as the public good, or they use it for themselves. And that is the only difference that matters.

H: What would be the components of a perfect day in your life right now? However you'd define it.

S: I'd be in New Hampshire for a quiet morning, and I'd write and then go swimming around the cove, say hi to the ducks and let the fish nibble my toes. And I'd have time to be quiet and stare at the water. Then my kids and husband would show up, and we'd go do something like a hike, and then a whole mess of people would show up for dinner. And we'd drink a lot of red wine.

And the day would start with a good cup of coffee. Getting in the water is really important for a perfect day, and it can't be just a shower. When I'm here, it's generally in a swimming pool, but I don't really like those. I really like deep dark cold, fresh water. Waterfalls are good; lakes are good--lakes above oceans--I like to be able to drink when I'm swimming.