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# Joseph and Judy Pickle

Joe and Judy Pickle lived at Judson House from 1959 to 1960 while Joe was an assistant minister in charge of students.

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**I**n the summer of 1959 we came to New York City after one year of marriage with a sense of adventure, excited to be living in Greenwich Village, looking forward to cultural lights, and fascinated by the chance to work in an “experimental church.” I had sought the opportunity to work with Howard Moody because I had known him earlier through the Baptist Student Movement, and we knew of Judson as a model of a vital engagement of the church with urban life. I had been assigned as an intern assistant minister to Judson Church.

The internship was part of my ministerial program at the University of Chicago. Howard interviewed us in Chicago, fed our growing enthusiasm, and left us puzzled by his question, “How can you stand it here? It is so quiet.” We caught on after spending July and August in his house on East 18th Street, and by September we were more prepared for the noises of the Village.

## THE CHURCH IN URBAN LIFE

That summer we got acquainted with Judson House by sitting in with the Church in Urban Life Program. We saw what a residential teaching center in the middle of the Village could mean to students trying to understand what life in the city was really about and what Christian service in the city might involve. The lively conversation, fascinating visitors from many walks of life and cultures, and friendships nurtured by common experience provided models for what we attempted during the next academic year.

Judson House had a main entrance on Thompson Street leading up a couple of stairs to the first floor, with an apartment, recently taken by associate minister Bernard (Bud) Scott and his wife, Gisela, on the right. There were stairways to the basement and to the second and third floors straight ahead, and a hallway to the left leading past

two small rooms to our apartment. In the basement, at the south end under our apartment, was a kitchen with tables and benches for up to twenty-four people, a room with coin-operated washer and dryer, and, under the Scotts' apartment, a lounge where most of our discussions and meetings were held. Next to the lounge was a small area that had become the Judson Gallery. Both the gallery and the kitchen had outside entrances from stairs down the Thompson Street sidewalk.

Our students lived in small rooms on the upper two floors: women on the second, along with Betty Murphy, the church's business manager, and her family; and men on the third. We had that year only about eighteen students, half of whom were international students. Most studied at New York University and a few attended Cooper Union or the New School for Social Research. A few were actively interested in Judson Church, but most students lived at Judson House because of the low cost, fewer dorm restrictions, and interesting housemates. They were not very close as a group, but we all got to like each other.

My internship included several specific responsibilities. As resident director of Judson House, I was to be a counselor to the students, deal with crises, and interpret what the Judson community was all about. As part of that work I was to serve as a member of the interfaith campus ministry at NYU. I was also to assist Howard Moody and Bud Scott, sharing some preaching duties and sit in on committees.

Everything we did at Judson taught us more than we could fully understand at the time. We learned from the congregation, from friends outside the congregation, from the city, from Howard especially. We learned about politics, art, theology, life, and tragedy. We learned about ourselves and what it meant to be the Church. We learned about sin (indirectly?) and about grace (directly). We were truly at home. Any other church experience we have had since then has had to meet a nearly impossible standard.

## **LIFE AT JUDSON HOUSE HAS ITS CHALLENGES**

Coming to Judson was great for me, but it was harder on Judy. Enthusiastic as she was, moving meant giving up her teaching position in Chicago and applying for a one-year appointment near the city.

Judy found a job teaching at the Woodmere Academy out on Long Island. Her hours and mine did not mesh. Judy had to get up early in the morning to catch a train on the Long Island line out to Woodmere. That meant she had to be up and out of our apartment no later than 6:30 a.m. Unfortunately, hot water did not come on at Judson House until 7:00 a.m. So I got up before 6:00 each morning, boiled water for her to wash, made breakfast, helped her get her stuff together and out the door. Then I went back to bed!

My day did not really begin until about noon. Students might be up and about, but if so they were on their way to class or work. The time for meeting with them was usually around supper time and into the evening. And so my workday continued till midnight or later. Judy, on the other hand, came home tired and needed to grade papers and prepare for the next day. We recovered on the weekends. Still, at times we felt like ships passing in the night.

Not that we had much passing room. Our apartment consisted of one room with ominously sagging plaster walls held up by burlap "wallpaper" and a Castro convertible. An opaque window with metal grillwork (protection from burglars?) faced onto Thompson Street. It was our only source of cross-ventilation in hot weather. The window was just above the heads of passing pedestrians and people could not really look in, but we could hear them talk as they passed. There was a tiny little kitchen behind a wall on the opposite side of the room. It had a two-burner plate, a sink, and a refrigerator, enough room to stand, and a small window onto West Third Street. Most of our really fancy cooking was done in an electric skillet. We did have a huge bathroom, bigger than many of the students' rooms. It had a window with clear glass looking out on the Judson garden.

It wasn't much of a garden, but everybody thought, "Someday we will have a garden." Nothing much came of it while we were there, but even so, it had a tree. There was room to park a car, but in those days nobody had a car.

## ROACHES AND RATS

The rhythms of Judson House as a student residence were set partly by the academic calendar, partly by the disappearance of most students on the weekends, and partly by kitchen work and mainte-

nance. At first, we hesitated to report the appearance of cockroaches (surely, we haven't been lax about cleaning?). When Howard and others stopped laughing at our midwestern naïveté, we learned why we saw so many cockroaches in the middle of the week: Wednesday was spraying day. Rats were not often seen on our floor, but they appeared regularly around the kitchen. One of the women students from Queens had a practical New Yorker's approach to such vermin. One day, she was sitting in the kitchen happily talking with a handsome young resident from Spain on whom she had an obvious crush, when she saw a large rat run past. She yelled for the young man to bring a large pan of water to a boil. She found a broom and began to chase the rat. When she had finally cornered the rat in the laundry room, she told him to bring the pan of hot water, with which she quickly doused the rat. The tender-hearted young man was appalled. The woman lost the boyfriend but she did get the rat.

For us, life in the Village centered on Washington Square and the larger university area. We got to know the coffeehouses, the folk music clubs, and something of the predominantly Italian neighborhood south of Judson. We remember restaurants where you could bring in Coke specials (red wine in Coke bottles) and play bocce in the back. But it was the gauntlet of bars and strip joints on West Third that reminded us we were in the big city. Judy remembers one poster advertising the delights within—a scantily clad woman with flaming red hair named Tempest Storm.

## **NAKED WOMEN!**

One night, while Judy's parents were visiting us from Chicago, her mother heard a loud voice from the street yelling "Wow! Naked Women!" My mother-in-law sat bolt-upright in our Castro convertible (Judy and I were sleeping in a small storage room) and quickly covered herself with a sheet, thinking the voice was referring to her! Judy's parents weren't so sure about our seedy lifestyle.

In spite of roving teen gangs, the Mafia, and pervasive heroin, we felt safe on the streets. We had a sense of the beat culture. Cramped little bookstores were everywhere. Poetry was spoken openly on the streets. Poets and painters and playwrights and musicians were everywhere.

But the heart of our life at Judson House was the Judson Church community. We were taken in immediately as family; we had never felt so at home in a church. And what a church it was—people who loved to spend time together, share each other’s causes, argue. For us, it was a transforming experience to be intimately involved in the life of an intensely engaged, intellectually vital, passionately committed congregation.

## HARVEY COX AND FATHER DIVINE

The style of my work with the residents of Judson House was set by the ethos of the church. Programming was minimal and fairly informal, and emphasized conversation and discussion of current topics, but mostly hanging out. Sometimes we brought in interesting speakers to give talks in the lounge on intriguing issues. I remember in particular Amon Hennessy from the *Catholic Worker*, Harvey Cox, Peter Berger, and Dan Wakefield.

What we did teach a lot was existential theology. We saw films filled with angst and pathos (Ingmar Bergman) and talked into the wee hours. I did little formal Bible study. This was based partly on a realistic sense of who the students were and partly on my growing resistance to fundamentalism. (I remember being deeply shocked and offended when one of the students in the Church and Urban Life program had found a job selling expensive Bibles to poor people who were to be persuaded that they absolutely had to have beautiful Bibles.) But mainly, my thinking was informed by the thoughtful theology of engagement that Howard Moody embodied and that was the Judson ethos.

In the summer of 1960 Judy and I directed the Church and Urban Life program, building on our internship experience. Now we were the old hands. The project gave us an opportunity to take students to other churches and community centers; to deal with students as they sought employment in the city; and to learn and share the resources of the city. We took trips to a mental hospital on Long Island, to Riker’s Island, and even to Father Divine’s center (called a “heaven”) in East Harlem, where we were well fed and inspired by the no longer physically present Father and Mother Divine.

Additional dimensions of my internship, beyond the outreach to students, were the engagement in local politics and discovering the

gritty spirituality of the arts. The extended ministry to students was a "going out" sort of ministry. In the fall, I spent a great deal of time attending meetings and assessing various approaches to working with students in an urban center. By the middle of the year it became clear that one of the key areas we should be working in was the black students. African-American students were just beginning to emerge as a distinctively self-conscious community at NYU and at Cooper Union. Several of us in the campus ministry worked closely with a new campus branch of the NAACP, advising on organization and trying to put black students in contact with supportive resources in the larger community.

### THE EARLY MOVEMENT

By the spring of 1960 sit-ins had begun in certain parts of the South. Black students and many of us who were supportive of their cause decided to conduct a sympathetic boycott of the Woolworth's at 42nd Street, across from the New York Public Library. Members of the church joined with a group of students from NYU and from Judson House to march in a silent picket line in support of the southern sit-ins. All of the picketers were told to dress in good clothes; look neat, clean, and respectable; and not to respond to taunts. We had been instructed in the tactics of nonviolent resistance. We were vilified, cursed, spat upon, and occasionally encouraged. One white-haired, well-dressed man whispered obscenities in Judy's ear as he walked along beside her in the picket line.

In a related effort, I spent some time trying to get students from Africa engaged in a dialogue with African-American students. It was painful to watch African students distance themselves from African-American perceptions of what it was like to be black. The African-American students were hurt and frustrated by this distance when they desperately wanted to find connection.

Politics was a way of life in the Judson community. Within weeks of our arrival we were distributing leaflets for the Village Independent Democrats, learning through Howard and other members of the congregation (Sue Harwig and Gretel Commings come to mind) about the needs of the community and being urged to engage the community in creative ways. At the 1959 Democratic Precinct Election, at which we hoped to unseat Carmine DeSapio, I was a

VID poll watcher even though I was not registered to vote in the city!

The Community Service Program ministry to troubled teenagers led to a growing concern about drug addiction, the need for alternative treatment for drug addiction, perverse laws and prison conditions, and a growing sense that abortion laws had to be changed. Other activists were committed to the Fellowship of Reconciliation and antinuclear movements such as SANE. The Caryl Chesman execution was the occasion for an impassioned challenge to capital punishment. We saw the world through the eyes of C. Wright Mills, Franz Kafka, and Samuel Beckett. But ours was not the politics of alienation but of engaged conversation. We hosted and encouraged labor reform movements and groups such as Fair Play for Cuba. We were determined to move out of the McCarthy era, and we saw Judson Church as a catalyst for resistance to conformity and spiritual vacuity.

## THE JUDSON GALLERY

Another part of Judson's ministry was to the arts. Bud Scott took particular responsibility, but the centrality of the arts program was clear to the congregation and was strongly supported by Howard Moody. The Judson Gallery allowed artists to have a small place in the Village where they could put up shows at no major cost and without having to deal with gallery pricing. We opened the basement stairway down into the little room below the Scotts' apartment, and it became a working gallery for a lively group of artists such as Claes Oldenberg and Jim Dine. Some of the earliest performance art presentations ("happenings") were at the Judson Gallery.

Little did we realize at the time that we were witnessing the transformation of pop art. I vividly remember running the ditto machine to run off early copies, in purple ink, of Ray Gun comics drawn by Claes and Jim. (I'd sure like to find my copies of those smudged art works.) Scott edited, with Daniel Wolf, a quarterly magazine, *Exodus*, which contained poetry, visual arts, and a "worldly spiritual vitality." The constant presence of artists in the Judson House intrigued our students. This presence, and the issues posed by the artists about the meaning of creativity and of spiritual meaning beyond the materialism of the age, touched us all deeply.

More than a building, Judson House was a living body in the heart of the city. Like Judson Church, of which it was a vital organ, it engaged its environment. Its many forms and mutations kept it in living connection with the Village, the city, and the world beyond.

We used to say of the Church that it was like a living cell with permeable membranes: drawing the world *in* for nurture in worship and community, and sending *out* its nurtured spirit in mission to transform the world. So, too, with Judson House. We drew people into the house as a place of growth, rest, reassessment, recovery, and learning. But we did not stay inside. We went through the membranes back into the world, confident that our life inside the Church was worth sharing more widely. We read, we talked, we argued, we explored because we had learned that one must both be nurtured in the fellowship of Christ and witness to that fellowship throughout the world. In all of its permutations, Judson House has been the place where people came and went, not from one world to another but from one dimension to another within a shared world full of risk and blessing.

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