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# Andrew Frantz

Andrew Frantz, Judson's Sunday School coordinator, moved into Judson House in 1995.

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I should probably begin by telling you that I do not believe in ghosts. This position is not ironclad, and if you, dear reader, happen to come from the great beyond, please take no offense and feel free to show up at the foot of my bed, rattling your chains in the middle of the night. It's just that in an age where angels seem to be hovering 'round cash registers everywhere, and with a generation of X-filers at the start of a new millennium, their heads filled with supernatural conspiracies far beyond Area 51, I remain the doubting Thomas. Call me stubborn. Call me obstinate. Call me Ishmael, I don't care. But if you are looking to consult with the occult, then call me a cab. Where some see spooks, I tend to see kooks. Of course, leave it to Judson House and the late Arlene Carmen to shiver the very timbers of my apparition opposition.

In the spring of 1995, Judson's Congregational Life Committee asked me to coordinate the entertainment for a party to be held that May in the garden. I had been up in front of Judson's congregation before, serving as liturgist, leading the Sunday School children in singing, and once having spoken on Father's Day. But this was to be my first time to lead the congregation in anything, and I was anxious to do my best.

For this particular evening I chose the music and put the songbooks together. While the songs may have been a little predictable, everyone seemed to enjoy singing them, especially out under the moon and stars, or whatever passes for stars in New York City. I led the Sunday School children in Woody Guthrie's "Mail Myself to You," and I sang "I'm Dating My Dog" for the first time at Judson. What everyone seemed to enjoy most was a spoof I had written on Georges Bizet's "Carmen," entitled "Laarman," marvelously sung by Margaret Wright and Robert McNamara, which told the story of Maxine Phillips, former head of Judson's Pastoral Search committee and a devout Socialist, and how she came to choose Peter Laarman,

a former union organizer who looks suspiciously like V.I. Lenin, to be Judson's new pastor. To wrap up this long (and incredibly egocentric) paragraph, I received lots of pats on the back and congratulations on a job well done. But none meant as much to me as two little words Arlene Carmen uttered later that night as she hovered over my bed surrounded by thousands of shiny reflecting lights. "Good job!" she said. Coming from someone I respected and cared for as much as I did Arlene, and, of course, coming from someone who had died the previous fall, the simple compliment meant a lot to me.

### THE GHOST OF ARLENE CARMEN

For many of the twenty-seven years that she worked at Judson, Arlene lived in the Judson House apartment I now called home. She was a wonderful and compassionate friend and someone to whom I looked for guidance and advice as I began my own sojourn as a member of Judson's staff.

Seeing Arlene again was simultaneously gratifying and terrifying: gratifying in the comfort and joy I felt in being reunited with such a dear friend, terrifying because, well, she was the *late* Arlene Carmen. Arlene was smiling as she spoke to me and when she finished, she slowly drifted away. As for me, I sat bolt upright in bed, shaken and in a pool of sweat. I just knew this could not have been a dream. It seemed so real that I got up and searched the rest of the apartment for any sign of Arlene's presence. Finding none, I returned to bed and thought, uh oh, it has finally happened. I have become one of those people everyone always makes fun of: a slow-talking Southerner claiming to have seen a ghost or a UFO. If Judson House was a mobile home and my name was Earl, I'd fit right in. As in biblical days of yore, I told no one but pondered these things in my heart.

Professing to be an anti-apparitionist may seem somewhat incongruous for someone who lived at Judson House. Judson House may not have been haunted but it was nonetheless alive with the ghosts of all who passed through its doors: shadows of runaways who found safe haven here, or the specter of youth left behind by a few of Judson's present members who once called this building home.

Be still and sense the spirit of the many whose hope was and is to make a difference in our community and in our world: workers in the offices of the Employment Project, Religious Leaders for a More

Compassionate and Just Drug Policy, or the Center for Medical Consumers.

## **OTHER VOICES, OTHER ROOMS**

Listen and you will hear the voices of those long since departed who call out to us from the archives. Hear the laughter of today's Sunday School children. Men's groups. Women's groups. A cacophony of sound from the thousands of words spoken in hundreds of committee meetings: Congregational Life, Social Concerns, Buildings, Finance, Personnel, the Board, Ordination, Sunday School. Through the reflective meditation of a study group, the belligerent wailing of drunks on the stoop, or the soulful blues wafting through the walls of Roland Wiggins's apartment, Judson House served as a repository for much of Judson's song.

## **ME AND MY DOG**

In the invitation to write something for this book, I was asked to describe my life at Judson House and to describe "any outrageous parties" I may have had. I am sorry to disappoint, but I am not the outrageous-party type. Aside from Arlene's appearance, it has mostly been a quiet life, or as quiet as living in the Village and around the corner from a firehouse can be. It was just me and my dog Garp, along with my neighbors Howard and Lorry Moody when they were in town, Arthur Levin working in the library, and Roland Wiggins. About the only time things got outrageous was when Garp unexpectedly decided to attend a committee meeting in the lounge. On those occasions, Judson sounded positively pentecostal as Garp (part golden retriever, part kangaroo) raced around the chairs and leapt in and out of the laps of shrieking committee members.

I will miss Judson House dearly. But what I will truly hate to have lost is the garden, and you don't have to have lived at Judson House to appreciate such a precious resource.

## **THE SACRED SPACE OF THE GARDEN**

As Judson's Sunday School coordinator, I am rarely able to attend Sunday services. At most, I can be found standing in the back of the

Meeting Room for a few minutes, trying to gauge how much longer the service will run before releasing the children to eat all the coffee hour cookies and run back and forth between the outstretched wings of the bas-relief angels above the baptistery. But in the summer, when the services moved to the garden, I was usually able to steal away, stand on the back porch, sing a verse or two of a hymn, and maybe even catch a sermon now and then.

To me, these summer services were what makes Judson so special: to be outside, and yet cloistered away from the city, with tall ailanthus and sycamore trees providing shade from the sun, surrounded by the greenery of the ivy growing against the Judson House walls; to sit amid petunias and impatiens, bright red geraniums and hot pink begonias; to sense the breeze against your face; to feel as if nothing separates you from the God of whom you are singing; and to listen not just to the ordained but to regular Judson folk talking about their lives and the wonders of the Spirit.

In this garden I heard Lee Guilliat speak passionately of her art. I listened to David Blythe reflect on what it was like to grow up as a preacher's kid. I watched Peter Laarman rally the troops before a Gay Pride parade.

In this garden I hid Easter eggs for the Sunday School children so many times that they all knew where I was going to hide them. I watched Charles Heist-McNamara plant tulip bulbs and found myself in the middle of snowball fights, severely outgunned.

In this garden I balanced paper plates of pasta on my knees, drank a little wine, swapped stories with Miriam Corbett, listed to Reathel Bean sing and play his guitar, and sung a song or two myself with the gifted Emmy Bean.

I know that the sum of Judson is more than old buildings and gardens, and I understand the material needs we have as we face a new day. But to me, the spirit of Judson was found in this garden more than in any other place. From the open air we breathed to the very dirt that lay between the bricks that made up the garden floor, Judson's spirit lived here, among the echoes of our laughter, the joined chorus of our singing, and the still silence of our prayers. The knowledge of losing this sacred space to a building chills me to the bone and will haunt me the rest of my days.

When I think of the garden and of Judson House, I think of Arlene Carmen. She was an enormous presence here for so long. I still

refer to the apartment I live in as Arlene's apartment. Several months after her "visit" at night, I stumbled upon a large picture of Arlene, taken at her twenty-fifth anniversary party, that was taped to a credenza in the church office. There was Arlene, smiling just as she did that night she visited me the spring before. The shiny reflecting lights I had seen that night came from the reflection off the silver dress she had worn to the party. Though I could not recall having done so, I must have seen this picture before and buried the image in my subconscious. Perhaps there was no ghost after all.

My first reaction upon realizing this was to shout out in joy. I wasn't crazy, at least not where ghosts were concerned. But my joy was short-lived, and I soon found myself overcome with sadness to the point of tears. The things and people we love often disappear too soon. Somewhere deep in my heart I treasure the notion that a friend of mine who was gone had come back to spend one last moment together. That thought alone is enough to make me want to believe.

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