
Bernice Lemley

Bernice Lemley was a participant in the 1954 Church in Urban Life project.

Somewhere in the dusty corners of this retired archivist's home, I should have found an account of my misspent youth in wicked New York at the age of twenty-one. That sentence is accurate except for the words "misspent" and "wicked." Nothing is misspent, and "wicked" is a phenomenon of perspective. Alas, the facts of much of my personal history appeared to have bowed to the exigencies of a migratory professional life, disappearing with several personal libraries. Many faces and images survive from that summer student institute at Judson in 1954, but memory alone, without names except those of Bob Spike and Marcus Barth, must supply both history and perspective.

The life-changing force of my first encounter with New York City forty-five years ago had the asteroidal character of collision, which invariably occurs when country meets city. Had my collision with urban life in its quintessential form not been cushioned by a parachute with attached oxygen tent called Judson House, I might not have survived the landing. That I returned safely to West Virginia from this "coming of age" classroom and lived to tell the tale is pure grace, incarnate in the caregivers who uniquely congregate in urban churches such as Judson. With the help of that parachute, I lived to experience the happy convergence of country-bred ideals and energy-infusing urban realities.

I brought with me to New York a worldview born of a West Virginia farm community near the Ohio River in the Great Depression. As one of eight children whose father was an American Baptist rural pastor and whose mother was completely devoted to caring for her large household, I ate the religious values of the time with my food. The primacy of work and education were deeply grounded in Baptist traditions that were strongly embedded in Scottish Calvinism. Lacking money, the people in the area had taught themselves, with occasional and unreliable evangelists providing a religious dessert. At

last, they chose one of their own, my father, to study for the ministry and be their pastor. My father was the Protestant equivalent of the worker-priest. Factory work and farming fed his family; pastoring was his endowed role in community life.

We moved to town, where in grade school I learned about poetry, music, and art. As I hung the clothes and hoed the corn, my imagination yearned to follow the roads beyond the hill behind our house. In my high school years, to know where the roads led became an obsession.

In 1951, a recruiter from Alderson Broaddus College came from beyond that hill, plucked me from my reveries, and set me down in a work-study program at the Myers Clinic Hospital in Philippi, West Virginia, along with dozens of other students from the hill country. For five years, American Baptists were my caregivers, winter and summer.

College study turned from nursing to my first love, music, and in the summer of 1952, I became an American Baptist ambassador to three states, singing in towns and mountains to find others like myself and bring them Baptist help. In the summer of 1953 I joined a team project at the Weirton, West Virginia, Christian Center, two blocks from the belching bessemers of a steel mill, doing community research and running recreational programs for neighborhood residents.

In 1954, a brochure and application from Judson Memorial Church suggested that I might be ready for the big city. All else defied that suggestion. At twenty-one, I was burned out. My professors at the college wrung their hands over a dutiful P.K. (preacher's kid), once open and adventurous, now withdrawn and sullen. I had sunk into a typical college crisis: (1) a change of focus from nursing to music (self-serving enjoyment over sacrificial service); (2) the destruction of my early worldview by religious teachings at variance with my upbringing; and (3) the inevitable rebellion and flight from the confusion into bittersweet romance and poetry. The wayward and the lovelorn are inseparable twins: They are blind, deaf, and dumb to pious advice.

So began the quest, not for the Holy Grail but for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow that would solve all problems, answer all questions, and clothe me in a persona I could like. Only years later, when I began to recognize myself in the young of later generations,

did I begin to understand how universal the questions are and why heaven keeps silent at that stage of life.

I had never seen my mother cry except at funerals. Tears flowed silently that day in June 1954 as I packed a bag and accepted \$24.00 for bus and subway fare and food to reach a place called Washington Square. Everyone but my mother and I knew it was the home of the beatniks. But Judson Church was American Baptist, so it was OK.

The Judson House staff had their priorities in order: "Find a job. Then we'll talk about God." No longer would my benefactors hand me jobs. I had to find them on my own. They would protect me while I learned but the assignment was mine. I hadn't a clue about how one finds a job in the city. Like a cold plunge in alpine rapids, nothing awakens a dead spirit quite as abruptly as the necessity to survive where nothing and nobody looks or sounds familiar.

Before I had finished congratulating myself that I had actually taken a subway, got off at the right stop, and even found the church at the end of it, I was back on the streets. That first day the silent guardians of fools and children followed me all over Manhattan as I looked for work. The dangers of getting lost or meeting life-threatening situations never entered my mind. What did what the overpowering smell of fish. No fishmarket in the world smells like a fishmarket on the Avenue of the Americas. We had fish for dinner that night.

Judson House's KP team fed me that night. KP duty is a sine qua non of summer projects and a blessing to the student. It is a predictable function that endows a sense of the familiar in the midst of multicultural shock. Common work promotes generosity among strangers.

Marcus Barth, the leader of the Summer Institute that year, was a kind spiritual caregiver who shared our shocks and dilemmas without judgment there in the basement lounge. The theological exercises of the mind in that intimate setting have over the years become the truths of the heart. We shared our encounters in the city, both on the job and in our evenings together. Together we visited Harlem and the Bowery, Fifth Avenue churches and storefronts on the Lower East Side, the United Nations chapel and the offices of the *Village Voice*. What lessons each carried home were probably, like mine, what each most needed to learn. From a kind theologian we absorbed by osmosis the spirit of a church that simply responded to need as it encountered it.

We learned about the world's need from a safe place. We learned how important houses of safety are in all human experience. Being "saved," as a spiritual truth, was transformed from the notion of fleeing from sin into one of finding faith in a "safehouse" in the midst of physical and spiritual desperation.

In those dazed first weeks when I was absorbing a hailstorm of human experience, I was unaware that I was learning what Marcus Barth taught us. I was too busy wrestling with Objective Number One: Find a job. In and out of employment offices, I mastered the art of job hunting slowly. I made a false start in my efforts. I took the first job I was actually offered, in a sleazebag handbag-cleaning warehouse, because I panicked. Twenty-four dollars does not go very far after buying bus fare from West Virginia to New York and job hunting all day, even back then.

After three weeks, the IRS closed the place down, and I did not get my last paycheck. Job hunting again, I was telling everyone I was looking for a temporary job, and no one wanted me. I had an interview at the Sloan-Kettering Institute for medical transcription. It was the perfect job. Lost in upper Manhattan, I took a taxi to the interview, and the driver took the long way around through Central Park. After I paid him, I had one dime left. He swore at me for not tipping him. I threw the dime at him and fled. I was so upset I flunked the typing test. Weeping, I told the interviewer what happened. She offered me the job, but I was defeated already. Convinced I would not be able to handle the job, I walked the sixty-eight blocks back to Thompson Street. I had no job and no money. On the way down, I stopped at the warehouse, demanded my last paycheck, and got it. A bank refused to cash it because I was not a depositor. Back at the house, the housemother rescued me and also invited me to babysit for her.

On Independence Day, I was far from independent. I poured out my woes to a fellow student at the house. He took me to a free concert in Washington Square Park, to a ride on the Staten Island ferry, and a sunset over the Statue of Liberty.

At the sweatshop I had become the unwitting object of hate without saying a word to the poorest people from the ghetto. In their eyes, I was one with the white supervisor who could have been a field boss on a plantation a century earlier. Not until the civil rights era of the 1960s did the warehouse experience help me understand

why all things white draw automatic anger from those who are at the bottom of the economic heap. For a brief moment that summer, I was at the bottom, too. What I did not understand was that I had a way of escape.

The weekend was soon over, and my friend encouraged me to look for jobs again. I met an employment agent who taught me, first, that I had skills people needed, and second, that city economics are different: "You are here for three months? Lady, you are permanent." The agent sent me to a dentist who had offices on Madison and 42nd Street. He did not ask about my permanence, and for the next two and a half months I was happy earning money as his dental assistant and accountant (more skilled as the latter than the former). By the end of the summer, I repaid Judson's faith in my power to carry my weight in the community and took home \$35.00 to my mother. She deserved every penny of her \$11 profit; she had heard from her prodigal daughter just twice.

I returned to school in the fall a new person. Judson House and urban life had corrected the wildly spinning gyroscope in my brain and spirit. Judson supplied the safe nest from which I learned to fly.

In my retirement I have discovered the relaxing pleasures of baseball, and I have discovered baseball writers. George F. Will, in *Bunts*, says that "opportunity is purchased with the coin of risk." All I can say is "Risk all your coins. The quest is worth it."

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