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# Living in the Balance

## September and October 2017

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My grandmother lived with my parents from the time I was born until she died when I was thirty. She was a widow at 50 and had little formal education. Staying in east nowhere West Virginia was not an option and she and her few belongings moved into the small home with my newly wedded parents in a suburb of Washington, D.C. My grandmother and I shared a room and I loved for her to go through her pictures with me and tell me who was who. She had a big family of sisters and brothers. Her mother and two siblings died of spinal meningitis when she was eight leaving her the oldest and in charge of the house and her siblings. Cooking. Cleaning. She was sent to another family's home as a teenager where she earned bed and board by doing chores. She married my grandfather... twenty years her senior... when she was 17. I loved curling up with her, listening to her stories, and going through her picture box. She smelled like fresh baked bread. Like Ponds Cold Cream. Like love.

My aunt and uncle lived next door to us, but we had little contact. My grandmother talked to her son "across the fence" occasionally, but we rarely shared a meal or a conversation. There weren't any "hard feelings" that I know of....just a family being a family in their own strange and estranged way.

My mother's parents lived eight hours away in North Carolina. They were both deaf so communicating or visiting with them was rare and arduous. I was a teenager before I began to understand that behind their disabilities were copious gifts. My grandfather tailored clothes on a treadle sewing machine. He and my grandmother could work on the same piece of crochet so identically that there was no "his side" or "her side"....just intertwined. They worked a beautiful bedspread together for my parent's wedding ...the one that now covers the foot of my own bed. He and my grandmother were both weavers in the cotton mill where deafness was a plus. They died when I was in college. I never knew them. Not really.

When I married Rex Meade, I expected the same strangeness of family disconnect that I knew and never thought I'd see his aunts and uncles after the wedding. I quickly realized that I had married into a foreign country where "wading up" with relatives was an ongoing and expected occurrence. Rex had not only an abundance of aunts, uncles and cousins, but a grandmother who was the matriarch and whom he adored as I did my own grandmother. Regular visits became part of our marriage and his family embraced me with open arms, love and overflowing tables of food.

His grandmother lived with his Uncle Earl and Aunt Myrtle Mae in a tiny town in Southwest Virginia. When I was a young bride, Earl Wright told me I had a "good turn" and it was the highest compliment I think I've ever had. A child of the depression, Earl served as a medic in World War II. He was small and wiry and fast. He rarely talked about the war. A cloud would pass over his face when the war was mentioned. Memory that did not fade. He'd come home from the war and built a small home on a piece of river bottom that would nearly flood them out if storms led the river to rise....which it did on several occasions. Water and mud pouring in up to three feet in the house. He and Myrtle Mae thought about moving. Talked about moving, but didn't want to move Mommy....Rex's grandmother....to another house. So they bailed water, hosed out mud, repaired and "righted" things in the house. It wasn't the first or the last hardship. Those mountains could wail suffering and lack.

Earl had a workshop behind his house where he squirreled away lumber and other “finds.” He’d go out into the shop and plane wood that was as gnarled as his hands. Cigarette smoked hung in the air. He’d smoked unfiltered cigarettes as many did...a habit started with rabbit tobacco as a kid and taken up for real in the war. He fashioned picture frames and clocks and gave them away to everyone. I received a clock and a polished humped backed trunk built from much prized wormy chestnut...the inside lined with cedar.

Earl worked in the coal mines of Southwestern Virginia his entire adult life. He and everyone he knew worked in the mines. Holding dinner pails and lighted hard hats they descended into the darkness every day to emerge encrusted in black. Clothes were shed outside and the first layers of coal dust scrubbed in tubs of water near an outside shed. I remember seeing the entrance to a coal mine for the first time. Knee high mud lead up to a mouth of solid darkness and I whispered, “Oh my God.”

Earl suffered a broken back and was nearly decapitated in two different mining accidents. Without the help of the union during the months of recovery he would have lost everything. After his recovery, he returned to the mine. He had a family and no other options. The coal dust would set up later as black lung, but he continued to work for more than 40 years in the mines before he retired. All he’d known his entire life was work. Idle hands were unknown and unwanted.

Earl and his son, Jerry, were hunters. Earl grew up hunting game and knew his way around every kind of gun. I knew nothing about guns except that in Washington, DC where I grew up, guns and murder were synonymous and struck fear in my being. Earl educated me and I observed the different types of guns and what they were used for and that included not bringing harm to another human. Earl held that hunting was a sacred act. He taught his son and grandsons the same. They shot only what they could dress and eat. There was reverence for the animals sacrificed. I honored that he honored it, but knew that I could never be a hunter or shoot a gun. It wasn’t in me and he honored that.

If Earl wasn’t working or hunting, chances were good that you’d find him in the little VFW building across the road from his house talking to other men about most anything but the war. Earl was a devoted Baptist and a deacon in the little St. Mary’s Chapel a couple of blocks up the road from his house. Earl explained the different kinds of Baptists...hard shelled, independent, missionary. His Bible was worn and stained from use and stuffed with notices of funerals and births. What I remember most was his kind heart and walking the way he believed.

Earl was as dependable as the sun rising. If you needed a hand, your garden tilled, a ride to the grocery store, your car jumped off, he was there. His skills as a medic came in handy to dress the wounds of his brother-in-law after his legs were amputated from diabetes. Earl died walking up the narrow road to rescue a neighbor’s dog tangled in his lead. A heart attack they said.

In this current state of our country, I ponder what Earl would say and imagine that right now he’d think that our country “didn’t have a good turn.” He wouldn’t agree with the much of anything. Our lack of civility. Our love of guns and our fascination with violence. Our meanness of spirit. Our vulgar language. Our heartlessness toward others. Our refusal to be our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. Our disregard for the land. He’d worry for our soul. I picture him shaking his head and walking out to his workshop to find some solace in working the wood and wondering how best to salvage and recreate from what he has. And I imagine him praying for us to take a turn toward the Light...a turn toward good.



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## *Calendar considerations.....*

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### **Centering Prayer Intensive Weekend Retreat**

Lake Norman, N.C. October 13-15 Led by Rev. Rob Field & Rev. Brad Smith  
Offered for persons with an established centering prayer practice.  
Space is limited to 15 and registration opens on August 28 at the  
Center for Spiritual Wisdom: [center4spiritualwisdom.org](http://center4spiritualwisdom.org)

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### **The Walter E. Ashley Memorial Lecture Series presents**

The Reverend Matthew Wright, an Episcopal priest, writer, and retreat leader working to renew the Christian Wisdom tradition within a wider inter-spiritual framework  
October 20 – 22, 2017  
First Congregational UCC, 1735 Fifth Avenue W, Hendersonville, NC 29739  
For more information, please go to [www.fcchendersonville.org](http://www.fcchendersonville.org)

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### **Ruby Sales,**

Founder of The SpiritHouse Project  
Sunday, October 1  
Anderson School of Theology for Laypersons, Anderson, SC  
<http://astlonline.org/>

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### **Cynthia Bourgeault**

The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, Georgia  
Saturday, March 17, 2018  
<https://www.stphilipscathedral.org/>

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### **Barbara Brown Taylor**

The Cathedral of St. Philip, Atlanta, Georgia  
Saturday, October 28, 2017  
<https://www.stphilipscathedral.org>

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### **Lake Junaluska Retreat Center**

Interfaith Peace Conference, November 16 – 19  
[http://www.lakejunaluska.com/events/spiritual\\_enrichment/](http://www.lakejunaluska.com/events/spiritual_enrichment/)

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### **Southern Dharma Center**

Jhana and Insight, September 9 – 15  
From Dualism to Understanding, September 21 – 24  
A Vipassana and Brahma Vihara Retreat, September 30 – October 7  
Buddhist Wisdom on Preparing for your own Death, October 13 – 16  
[www.southerndharma.org](http://www.southerndharma.org)

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### **Greenville Friends of Jung**

Offering film discussions and Jungian workshops!  
<https://sites.google.com/site/friendsofjunggreenville/events>

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*Calendar considerations.....*

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**The Sophia Institute, Charleston, SC**

Heartwork – Being a Spirit in the World, Mark Nepo, September 15 – 17

Energy Medicine for Healthy Living, September 22 – 23

Mindful Advocacy for Personal and Community Resilience, October 6 – 7

See the website for these and other one day events. [www.thesophiainstitute.org](http://www.thesophiainstitute.org)

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**The Anchorage**

Praying the Scriptures, Directed Retreat, November 13 –17, Mepkin Abbey

Annual Beach Retreat, Litchfield Inn, Pawleys Island, February 9 – 11

Many other offerings locally in Greenville

<http://www.theanchorage.org/>

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**Advanced Centering Prayer Retreat**

Valle Crucis Retreat Center, Valley Crucis, NC

November 26 – December 2, 2017

Contact Becky Hannah for more information (828) 702-3518

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**Greenville Interfaith Forum**

Annual Interfaith Dinner Dialogues

Thursday, October 19, 2017

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**Awakening Soul – Sacred Revolution**

Diana Butler Bass and John Dominic Crossan

November 9 – 12, 2017

Lutheridge Conference Center, Asheville, NC

<http://www.awakeningsoulpresents.org/awakeningsoul-events/17-sacred-revolution/>

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**Silent Retreat Weekends**

October 6 - 8 and December 1 – 3, 2017

Order of Saint Helena, North Augusta, South Carolina

<https://www.osh.org/events.html>

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**Kanuga Conference Center**

Lansing Lee Conference, October 22 – 29

Enneagram, October 26 – 29

Icon Writing with Teresa Harrison, November 13 – 18

[www.kanuga.org](http://www.kanuga.org)





## About Spiritual Direction —

- Offers a space and time for you to explore, reflect upon, and deepen your relationship with God.
- Provides a haven from the daily busyness of the outer world and opens a time to be still and to reflect on your inner journey.
- Is a companioning relationship grounded in dialogue and discernment.
- Explores ways you may integrate spirituality into your daily life.
- Is not limited to any one spiritual practice or tradition.
- May involve one or two meetings or multiple meetings over time.

## You may wish to consider spiritual companioning if you are —

- Longing for a deeper relationship with the Divine
- Looking for a place to dialogue about spiritual questions
- Seeking ways to connect with the Spirit in a more intentional way
- Discerning ways to live in a more integrated and whole way
- Standing at a crossroads in your life
- Exploring new or fresh ways to be in relationship with God

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For more information about Spiritual Direction, please feel free to contact me by phone  
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*The photos in this journal are of my grandmother, my grandparents, and my parents. And other growing up things....*