

PREFACE

I met Sister Frances Carr, the leader of America's Shakers, fifteen years ago, after my first Sunday Meeting at Chosen Land, near Sabbathday Lake, in rural central Maine. I had soaked in every detail of the service, from the selection of Scripture to the wide wooden planks of the floor, from the way the two Shaker men sat on the opposite side of the large, high-ceilinged room as the three Shaker women, to the way the outside world looked slightly different through the antique panes of glass on the double-hung windows. I made special note of the way the dozen or so non-Shaker participants joined in with their thoughts mid-way through the service. I sat silent that Sunday morning, thinking, watching, letting my feelings wash over me.

It was unlike anything I had ever experienced. I come from a Catholic upbringing, and it seemed odd to me that there were no crucifixes or stained-glass windows, no organ music, no clerical robes. Most remarkable was the fact that nearly everyone, even non-Shakers, participated with equal authority. I wondered what it would feel like to stand up and “testify” in front of others. I wondered if people thought about what they would say before the service, or if their words were more spontaneous.

After the service everyone moved into an adjoining room where we greeted each other and exchanged pleasantries. Sister Frances was in her mid-60s back then. She had a charming wide smile and a natural talent for making people feel at ease. She looked beautiful in her royal blue Shaker dress. She extended her hand for me to shake and asked, “How is it that you came here today?”

I answered that I was new in town and that I had mentioned to a neighbor that I was looking for a nearby church to attend. “And what a coincidence,” I said, “My neighbor is one of your summer tour guides, and she thought I might enjoy it here, which I do.”

I'll never forget what Sister Frances said next. She was still holding my hand, her left hand now on top, as well, when she said, “There are no coincidences in life, dear, only

God-incidences.” She wasn’t making small talk. She said it as though it was a fact. And with a firm nod indicating the end of our brief introduction, she let go. There were other hands for her to shake that morning in the -Brick Dwelling House. Her words, few as they were, had a profound effect on me.

I knew I would return to Chosen Land, and I did. I needed to know more about this faith that, at first glance, I found so appealing. I soon became a “regular,” one of about three dozen or so local people who worshiped often with the Shakers.

Back in those days, I was a broadcast journalist working as a prime time anchor and reporter for the ABC News affiliate in Portland. I was proud of my work, especially my investigative pieces, and I was well suited to sinking my teeth into big complicated stories. I was also something of a local celebrity and the Shakers occasionally teased me about it. My picture would appear on the sides of busses during the “ratings season” and on one occasion Sister Frances jokingly said, “I waved to you today while I was out grocery shopping, Jeannine, but you just zipped right by!” I was comfortable with my church family, and they seemed equally comfortable with me.

Maybe that was why, a few years later, Sister Frances pulled me aside after meeting and asked, “Is there anything you can do to get PBS to stop airing their documentary about us? It’s going to be on again in a week.” She was talking about Ken Burns’s *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God*. “It’s full of mistakes and gives people the impression that there are no Shakers left, that our faith is dead.” Her words spilled out like steam from a kettle. “I’ve called them several times,” she told me, “but nobody calls back. I even wrote them a letter, but no one even bothered to respond.”

This had clearly been bothering her for a long time. I was aware of the Ken Burns documentary, and knew that Sister Frances was right. He had, indeed, made a mistake, one that chipped away at the viability of the Shaker faith every time it aired. But would I be able help her?

“Sister,” I slowly began, “there's no way I can get PBS to drop programming. If they

won't listen to you they surely won't listen to me.” I paused for a moment to collect my thoughts, knowing what I was about to say would bring me up against a challenge I might not be able to meet. “But, what I can do, with your help, is tell people the real story about the Shakers. I can do my own documentary. It may not be as popular as Ken Burns’s film, but I promise to do my best to tell people the truth about what’s happening here.”

And that’s how it began. I started working on the story in October of 2000. My goal was twofold: to tell the story of a simple people trying to live God’s will as they see it, and to shatter the tragic misperception that America’s Shakers, as well as their faith, are dead. It was a challenge like none I had ever faced before. There were budgets to create, reports to fill out, research to do, phone calls to make, people to hire, scholars to be brought onto the project—all things that required an enormous amount of time and money. There would be no employer behind me this time, either. The burden of setting the record straight sat squarely on my shoulders.

I got to work right away and began writing grants seeking funding. Within a year I had enough money from the Maine and New Hampshire Humanities Councils to film the Shakers’ oral histories and hold a scholar seminar to help guide my research prior to the shoot. The next step was to produce a brief “trailer” from the interviews that I could use to “pitch” the film to broadcasters and distributors. I was well on my way when the unthinkable happened. I was seriously injured in an automobile accident and had to stop working. I spent nine months at an outpatient rehabilitation facility and underwent surgery to repair my failing eyesight. “The Shaker Project,” as it was called back then, was stalled for more than a year. I wondered if the story would ever be told. I couldn’t do it alone anymore. I prayed for help. Then, one day, a writer and emerging filmmaker who had heard about my project called. Her name is Betsy Connor Bowen. She told me how her lifelong curiosity about the Shakers had turned to admiration for the faith after she found, in a trunk in her family's barn, prints of her writer/photographer father’s studies of the New Lebanon Shaker (New York) community in the 1930s. We agreed to collaborate. That was a “God-incident,” for sure.

And so in the fall of 2003, Betsy, myself, and a crew of seven, spent a week at Chosen Land interviewing the Shakers. Their responses and images, captured on videotape and in more than 1,800 digital still photographs are the basis for this book and DVD. The Shakers did not ask me to do this, but they participated fully.

During the year that followed I made a remarkable discovery. As I continued researching the Shaker faith within the spectrum of American Christianity, I learned of an amazing new faith that was growing by leaps and bounds—due in large part to the Internet. It's called the "Postmodern" or "Emerging" Christian church. It began popping up on the radar screens of religious scholars back in the early 1990s, although the movement itself dates back to at least the early 1980s. What fascinated me most were the dramatic similarities between Postmodernism and Shakerism. My instinct as an investigative reporter kicked in. Could I prove that America's oldest religion resembled its newest? And if I could, what meaning would it hold? I would have to dig deeper into Postmodernism to find out if my theory would 'hold water,' especially among scholars.

Postmodern Christians, I learned, feel that faith should be more than just believing in something, it's about doing something; it's about the way you live, and about being responsible for the choices you make. You will learn more about this and how it relates to Shakerism in the chapter titled "Place."

Postmodern Christians, like Shakers, also believe faith is about doing the work of salvation yourself, rather than adopting someone else's creed, theology, or spirituality. Both groups believe faith is a very individual experience, a topic discussed in depth in the chapter titled "Faith."

Postmodernists, like Shakers, are perennially in search of life's meaning by living "lives with meaning." They are politically active. They buy and think "green." They are religiously and socially tolerant. They are also non-hierarchical in structure, as are Shakers. They particularly shun the "mega-churches" of the 1980s and 90s, in favor of smaller, more intimate gatherings where worship and religious discussion take place in a less

structured setting. They would likely feel right at home in a Shaker-style Meetinghouse, also known as a “house church.” The chapter titled “Worship” gives you a rare insider’s view, in words and images, of the unpretentious nature of Shaker worship.

As you learn more about today’s Shakers, you may ask who are the Postmodernists? They are described by scholars as being mostly young, liberal, educated, Internet-savvy Christians who reject traditional churches in pursuit of a new and deeper understanding of the image and nature of God. Likewise, Ann Lee, the bold English woman who came to America in 1774 to establish the Shaker faith, also rejected her traditional church (Anglican) and its image of God. She and her early followers paid a dear price for their radical departure from the religious norm, an aspect of Shaker history explored more fully in “The Spirit and the Bride.”

Where did all this lead me? I concluded with firm conviction that the rapidly emerging Postmodern Christian faith is essentially a mirror image of America’s Shaker faith; that Shakerism, far from being “over,” (when measured exclusively by membership) is alive and well, by virtue of the fact that the faith itself (the true measure) reflects something quite vibrant. Even if the day comes when there are no Shakers, the heart and soul of their faith will remain alive in the people who comprise the Postmodern movement which now spans the globe. It is a conclusion I could never have predicted.

Nor could I have predicted what happened at Chosen Land in 2006. Brother Wayne Smith, a Believer who had spent more than twenty years in the faith, left abruptly. He was the youngest and most vibrant Shaker, and many people outside the community had pinned their hopes on him to bring new members into the fold. But he left Chosen Land after meeting and falling in love with a freelance reporter from the Boston Globe who came to the village to write a story about the family. I was shocked initially, but in retrospect now see the red flags I had earlier missed. I encourage you to pay close attention as you read this book to Brother Wayne’s comments on pacifism, community, progressive revelation, and yes, celibacy. His words, like canaries in a mineshaft, should have alerted anyone who was “really” listening to the fact that his spiritual life, deep as it

is, was moving in a different direction. I was blindsided when he left the church, and it was my own fault.

Brother Wayne's departure made me realize that Ken Burns isn't the only documentarian who might miss the obvious, a situation explained more fully in "Work." I thought I was better than Ken Burns. I am not. We are both human, both capable of making mistakes and errors in judgment, both vulnerable to our own egos.

My life changed, too, over the years, in ways I would not have imagined. I matured spiritually, and I began to look at the world differently. I became tolerant and much more ecumenical about the nature of worship. I found something good in everyone. I could see the spark. I changed my idea of the "image" of God to include the feminine. I began listening to my inner voice. I followed the leading of the Spirit. I don't recall exactly when all this happened, it wasn't an earth-shattering moment, but at one point I realized I had become a different woman. Shakerism transformed me.

What I now realized is that this project had become my public testimony. It was my prayer for peace and tolerance, my prayer that people would stop hurting each other in the name of God, my prayer that the Spirit, which is the essence of love, will be set free among us all. That is the real meaning of "Shaker style," and it feels good and right to share these feelings with you.

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