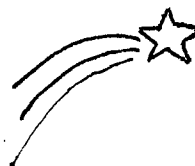


ODYSSEY

by Ann Boutwell Fields

1990



edited by Meredith Fields, 1996

In Malden Massachusetts in 1909 my mother and father had been high school classmates but not sweethearts. She had her eye on someone else. Somehow my mother's modest middle class family scraped together the money to send her to Wellesley College. Soon after graduation she married her Dartmouth beau, and then my sister Priscilla was born. But soon my mother was widowed. For the next ten years Priscilla was brought up by her grandparents while my mother took the train each day to her job in Boston. Riding on that same train one day, as fate would have it, was her high school classmate who was still a bachelor. Now my mother was an auburn-haired beauty. There was a whirlwind courtship and two months later this couple in their mid-thirties were married, and the next year I was born-- in December, 1927. By then my big sister was eleven.

Both sets of my grandparents had come out of very modest circumstances to rise to prominence in Malden. My grandfather Boutwell who grew up on a New Hampshire farm was one day to serve on the Governor's Council in Massachusetts and to establish a prominent Boston law firm. Both of my grandmothers, publically elected, served for years on the Malden School Committee! My father's family were pillars of the Baptist Church. On Sundays my mother's parents attended the Ford Hall Forum in Boston to hear a variety of freethinkers. All my grandparents were intelligent and curious, readers, thinkers, and civic-spirited.

My mother and father built a charming, modest-sized house in Malden, just two blocks from his family homestead. In his later years Grampa Boutwell was nearly totally blind from cataracts and my Dad guided him to their Boston law office every day. I grew up surrounded by benevolent adults. There were to be no little siblings for me, and not even any cousins. Everyone in the family, including my big sister, was very good to me and enjoyed talking to me, reading to me and teaching me. As a result I was very bright and somewhat spoiled.

At five and a half I entered public school. When it appeared that I already knew how to write and read, I was advanced to the second grade. My ineradicable memory of the second grade is of the kindness of the teacher that first day. I was small, bewildered, scared and shy. I didn't know how or when or where to go to the bathroom and I was too scared to ask. Finally the teacher spotted the puddle under my seat. She asked three other adjacent children first if they had had an accident so that by the time she got to me my shame and terror had subsided.

When I reached the age of seven or eight my parents began to send me off to summer camps-- for the whole summer! They were great about sending mail and visiting. Once my lawyer/pilot father circled over the camp in a small biplane and dropped out a mail package for me in which there were chocolate coins and a note that said these were pennies from heaven. My mother clipped out my favorite comics to send with her letters, and made up questionnaires that I loved to

answer about life at camp. My sister sent homemade paperdolls that she had drawn. I was okay, but I wasn't always what you'd call a happy camper.

I had some times of homesickness and some times of difficulty getting along with the other girls in my cabin. For instance, there was the time that my parents sent me a package containing eight items from the candy counter: rolls of lifesavers and packs of gum. Now there were nine girls in the cabin including me. As I opened this exciting package, eight pairs of eyes watched. One of the girls said, "Ooh, Ann, may I have one?" It really didn't occur to me that I had any other option than to say "yes." And so of course seven other requests followed immediately and moments later I sat alone on my bed with an empty package. One of the girls offered me a stick of gum. I was too proud to cry, but I certainly was despondent! The universe giveth, and the universe taketh away. Like Job on the ash heap I sat on my camp bunk, and now all eyes were averted from me because nobody wanted to acknowledge the situation. Nobody wanted to part with any goodies.

Community was shattered, but not forever. Soon after I had a quite opposite experience with the same group of girls. We had been taken somewhere together in the back of the camp truck, and now the outing was over and we were heading back to camp. It was late in the day. Dark clouds were covering the sun. In the back of the open truck we huddled together, pulling on sweaters. Sure enough, a shower came on. Since there were a few ponchos among us we unrolled them and held them aloft, giggling and jostling as the truck bumped over the New Hampshire dirt roads. We began to sing between giggles. And that is when it happened. There came to me a feeling of total acceptance, total merger with this group of friends. It was a feeling of community so powerful that it transcended that moment, that place. It seemed to connect me with the whole universe, and joy, and eternity. The horizontal bonds of delight in my friends suddenly swooped in a great parabola, pointing off to the goodness and grandeur of existence and I was soon drenched not only with rain but also with the love of life.

When I was about ten my father's mother died. Now the Boutwell family homestead was ours to use. We moved into the big red Victorian mansion with a big bedroom for me: bookshelves and two closets and French doors that opened onto a balcony! I must have felt like a princess but I looked more like a tomboy-- with braces on my teeth, in pigtails and bluejeans.

A story from that time:

A frail, elderly lady comes to the front door of our large Victorian home. My father greets her, ushers her into the parlor and draws the drapes. Perhaps a half hour later they emerge, and as he escorts her to the door I hear her ask, "...And how much will that be?" "That will be five

dollars," my father answers. She pays him in cash, and then turns to the door with a sigh. She says, "It's hard when you get old and you're all alone in the world." My father replies with something kind and reassuring. Perhaps he says, "To make a will is a very thoughtful act-- I wish everyone would do it."

After she has left I ask with great curiosity: "Daddy, don't you usually charge much more than five dollars to make a will?" "Yes, I do, honey," he tells me, "but those dollars are going to mean much more to her than they would to me. I really hated to take anything at all, but not to would have hurt her pride."

Later in my life I would read the words "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." But that maxim was already in my heart.

Living in the big red house we now had the image of a family that was rich. Meanwhile, rumblings of war grew louder. My father was more and more away from home. By 1940 he left his law practice to command the antisubmarine patrol of the east coast.

Another story:

I was thirteen years old, and it was the fall of my sophomore year in high school-- early fall, a warm Indian-summer sunshiny Sunday. My hair was still quite wet as I walked home alone. A half hour earlier I had been baptized by immersion in front of the entire congregation of the First Baptist Church of Malden. The dramatic moment had been disappointing. I guess I had been expecting a revelation, expecting to hear God's call. Instead, to my dismay, I had spluttered and staggered as I waded out of the tiny tiled pool. It had not been a transforming moment. But now as I walked home my new state of holiness began to envelop me-- I think I willed it to-- and I daydreamed of becoming a missionary. I would do something to bring God's love and truth to others, and Miss McCormack would be proud of me.

Miss McCormack had been my Sunday school teacher for two years now. Every Sunday morning at 9:30 in the Baptist church Miss McCormack was waiting at the classroom door for all of "her girls" to arrive, and she had a special smile and a special word for each of us. Try as I may, I find that I can't for the life of me remember what we talked about in that classroom, not one single thing. My best friend Dot went to Miss McCormack's class, too. Whenever a special occasion arose Dot and I would spend hours laboring over handmade Christmas or Easter or birthday cards for Miss McCormack. And for her part, she gave us unconditional love. Really, can a church do better than that?

Malden High School was three times larger than the junior high I had attended. Once again I was a small fish in a large pond. But high school offered some really exciting possibilities with its many extracurricular

activities, clubs and sports. I joined as many sports as I could manage: basketball, archery, field hockey, tennis team. I worked on the high school newspaper every day with my friend Art, pausing to have an occasional discussion about the creation of the universe. It was a good adolescent friendship-- wholesome, my mother would have called it. On our senior class outing Art invited me to go on the rollercoaster. "Sure" I said, with my heart in my mouth, knowing that for no other human being would I have agreed to step into that instrument of terror.

There was another terror involved in graduating from high school. It was 1944. My father the pilot was now in the Pacific, commanding squadrons of bombers and fighter planes. Art and I and the Salutatorian gave our graduation speeches in the football stadium. 325 members of our class were graduating, but only 250 of us sat on the football field. Seventy-five of the boys had already enlisted in the service and were not present. My valedictory, given while our country was deeply at war against Nazi genocide and terror, was nevertheless a visionary one. I looked to a future of one world, one global humanity in which the lion and the lamb would lie down together, in which swords would be beaten into ploughshares, in which violence and suffering would give way to compassion, freedom and equality. With the world in the grip of Nazi terror, with sons of these parents fighting on foreign soil and the holocaust gradually becoming a known reality, this idealistic speech from a 16-year-old girl probably seemed to many of the listeners inappropriate. The Congregational and Universalist ministers had kind words to say to me afterward and asked for copies. My own Baptist minister made no comment.

At our high school senior banquet I won the lion's share of the prizes: girl with highest scholastic record, French prize, journalism prize, and girl athlete-scholar. What a send-off from my home town! It would be good to remember this next fall at college.

Indeed it was. At Vassar I found myself in a world of young women all of whom seemed sophisticated, accomplished, brilliant, beautiful, wealthy and worldly-wise. By contrast I felt naive, innocent, gauche and drab. But these feelings gradually passed as I discovered how much I loved the learning, and how surprisingly good I was at most of it. I tutored several friends through freshman physiology. The department called me in and urged me to consider it as a major field, but I declined with thanks. The courses I really wanted to get to most were philosophy, psychology and religion. These were the frosting on the academic cake. My thesis was "A Comparison of the Ethics of Karl Marx with the Teachings of the Hebrew Prophets." And at eighteen I was a Phi Beta Kappa!

While I was home for Christmas during my senior year, my older sister had a holiday party and she invited me to be the date of somebody named Arnold Fields who was her

neighbor. "How old is he?" I asked. "Twenty-five," she said. "Wow," I said, "that's old-- I'm still eighteen." "But you'll be nineteen before the party," she pointed out. "Okay," I agreed, "why not. What's he like?" "Well, he's quiet, and he's nice, and he's smart." "And how tall is he?" I asked warily. "Plenty tall," she assured me. A year and a half later, after I had completed a master's degree in psychology at Wellesley, we were married. And... we are still married!

My first job was at the Harvard Guidance Center giving psychological and aptitude tests to returning veterans receiving occupational counseling. On October 24, 1949 I was called from my work and shown to a special room where some visitors awaited me. I was astonished to find three people from my father's law office whom I had known all my life. I smiled and greeted them with warm surprise, but they seemed silent and sad. Miss Barker, my father's secretary, urged me to sit down, and then she told me that my father had died in his sleep the night before. He had been at an Air National Guard conference in Alabama, had given the keynote speech, and then died-- at age 57-- too young-- too soon to meet his first grandson who was born exactly six months later and who looked exactly like his grandfather.

During my twenties I was pregnant every other year. After two beautiful children, a boy and a girl, my third pregnancy ended in stillbirth. We were not churchgoers at that time and I found no way to deal with my feelings about the loss. I can understand, retrospectively, that I was clinically depressed for about four months. In the ensuing years our two "little boys," as we long called them, appeared on the scene.

And here, a story about one of those little boys: "Take him directly to the hospital and go to the emergency entrance," said our family doctor over the phone, "and I'll meet you there." The tone of his voice was not reassuring.

Our two-year-old son Dick had a terrible swelling in the side of his neck. I had noticed the beginning of it the day before, precisely two weeks after our older children had had the mumps. Well, of course, I'd thought, now Dick is getting mumps right on schedule and I know exactly what to do. Perhaps I don't even need to bother Dr. Fisher.

What a mistake! By the next morning his neck was red, swollen and angry, and his temperature was frightening. This wasn't mumps.

Panic time. Call Arn to come home. Call neighbors to take care of my older children. Bundle Dick into the car and race to the hospital two towns away still hearing the ominous sound of the doctor's voice in my mind.

Now my little boy was being examined, to be taken to surgery, and I sat alone in the waiting room, helpless,

filled with panic and remorse. The words of the Lord's Prayer arose in my mind and I began silently to recite those familiar phrases, calming and comforting. But halfway through I stopped. What am I saying? I asked myself. This is hypocritical. I don't believe in a cosmic daddy who grants favors if you ask nicely.

So what do I believe in? I wondered. What can I look to that will give me hope? Well, Dick is a big boy for his age. His body is strong and healthy and he has been a happy child. His family loves him. All of the life-sustaining, nurturing, creative forces are working for him now and he's in the capable hands of our wonderful family doctor. Surely, he'll be all right! I tried to tell myself.

But I didn't feel sure at all. I missed that heavenly father to whom I used to turn for favors. And furthermore I needed forgiveness. I was overwhelmed with guilt and remorse for not having called the doctor earlier. Had I endangered my child's life? Was this precious toddler going to sicken and die? Oh no, please, dear God, no. Please be there for me this one more time! And again I began the prayer of Jesus. And again, I could not complete it. There was nothing to do but hope.

During those years, Bill Moors came to be the minister of the Medfield Unitarian Church, and we became his parishioners. It was Bill who introduced me to the writings of Sophia Fahs and who convinced me that I was just the person who should help in the Sunday school! And Arn became the moderator of the congregation. So, indeed, I began to help in the Sunday School and was soon the superintendent, as we called it then.

After several years of working with the R.E. program and feeling the frustration of the limitation of one hour a week, I had the idea of a Unitarian summer day camp program, and offered to hold one at our Medfield home. It seemed the perfect setting for a cultural study of the sort that Polly Laughland and Olive Lowe and I had been pioneering in our church schools. We would combine the learning about another culture with all the usual camp activities: assemblies, singing, outdoor games, nature crafts, rest hour, picnics and trips. My next-door neighbor Dot (the very same Dot who was my childhood best friend in Miss McCormack's Sunday school class) volunteered her swimming pool-- and soon her prodigious talents and energy were engaged as well. Several other talented educators, volunteer and professional, joined the staff enthusiastically.

One summer our theme was Norway, the land of Edvard Grieg; another year it was the Arab world; and another summer it was classical Greece. We would end our two week camp with an evening festival for families to share what we had been doing: there was a performance of Peer Gynt; a Pan-Athenaic procession; an Arabian bazaar. Each child received an award for something, an individual recognition

and applause. Will you believe it when I tell you there was never, ever a discipline problem at day camp?

After seven years of R.E. in Medfield, our family moved to Concord and I became Director of Religious Education there for the next five years. This was my first professional job in R.E. and it was a challenge. There were eminent educators here-- Abbie Elliot, Roger Fenn, Roger Duncan, Norman Harris. There were 350 children enrolled in the R.E. program. On Sunday mornings we had double sessions of church school, and three different chapel services with five seatings. I really functioned as the children's minister on Sundays, and as the teachers' consultant during the week. After five years at the Concord church and many learnings from the good people there, I resigned because the church had become almost immobilized by dissension over the Vietnam war. During my last year, though, our R.E. committee decided to offer our UU sixth graders a special two-hour session every Monday afternoon instead of a Sunday morning class. What a success! I was the lead teacher and I had an artist as co-teacher. One of the most popular kids in the class was none other than Kim Harvie and she recalled this class when she spoke many years later at my ordination.

A year after leaving the First Parish in Concord I agreed to work with our church in Arlington, where I stayed for four years. It was a time of much educational experimentation and ferment. In addition to my work in R.E. I was then teaching Parent Effectiveness Training, and receiving training myself in family dynamics and family therapy. During this time, working with families had come to seem to me the most important part of my work in the church, and when I left the the Arlington church I really thought I was through with religious education and ready to become a family therapist.

But Gene Navias, as we all know, is the voice of conscience, the Jimminy Cricket of UU R.E. And just as I was about to defect, Gene whispered in my ear about the First Church in Belmont where there was a half-time R.E. job with a wonderful new minister, Marjorie Sams... and further whispered that there might be the opportunity to teach an R.E. seminar to the UU students at Harvard Divinity School. And the rest, as they say, is history. Listening to whining families could in no way compete with an exciting R.E. program, creative family services, and the challenge of teaching at HDS. So there went the next five and a half years, and I wanted them never to end.

A story from that time:

It was at the Belmont church that I was ordained Minister of Religious Education. Of course I invited Gene to participate in my ordination, and to my delight he agreed. I was still in my heyday of thematic worship services as I planned this ordination, and my theme was "stars to follow." The imagery of stars wove through the sermon and the prayer and the music. But I had not, I



think, mentioned this to Gene, but simply had asked him to give the charge to the minister. As you might expect, he gave a wonderful charge to me-- full of both challenge and affirmation, and with his usual blend of good humor, eloquence and thoughtfulness. At the end of this charge he suddenly took my hand and held it in his, saying, as it just occurred to him, "Ann! You have a star in your pocket!" And then, just as in a Hollywood musical, he burst into song-- singing, in fact, a song I had never heard before: "You've Got A Star in Your Pocket." Gene's rich voice and vibrant personality filled the sanctuary, and as he continued to hold my hand and sing to me I felt like Judy Garland. Unfortunately, I had neither Judy's voice nor the wit to respond in any other way than to give him a hug. One of my sons commented that the service took a definite upswing after Gene Navias. And isn't it always so?

I would never have left the Belmont church, had it not been that the opportunity to work directly under Gene at the UUA was opening up, and I couldn't resist applying for the job as Children's Program Consultant. I loved every day of the four years that I was there. I loved the traveling, the networking. I loved getting the Renaissance programs established. I loved the feeling of being at the heart of this denomination of which I am so proud, being aware of how hard so many others were working, too. My very favorite opportunity was working with the REACH packet-- to make it as attractive and alluring as possible. As I did that work I was struck by the fact that fifty years earlier my mother, too, had been coming in daily to Beacon Hill to do page layout work on educational materials. No wonder I loved it! It was in my genes.

I guess it's the part of my current work with Barbara Marshman and Charlene Brotman that I find most gratifying: helping to imagine how to create visual appeal on the printed page, how to create books for children that will communicate a legacy of caring and compassion, books that will sing the liberal song of love, books that will celebrate the earth and its goodness, and teach us to walk reverently on the land, living in peace with all other beings.

Creating curriculum or UU Kids' books is really the only appropriate work for me now. I no longer have the memory or the attention span for organizational work. When my daughter said to me recently, "Mom, you ought to have your head examined!" it wasn't the voice of a petulant teen but that of a caring 38-year-old psychiatrist. So, I have indeed had my head examined by a magical machine that scans the brain by magnetic resonance. It will be a couple of weeks from now that we learn the results.

Meanwhile, I can't tell you how much I enjoy the luxury of retirement, and of having leisure time with my husband. We built our home in Concord twenty-five years ago and by now, as they say in the real estate ads, it needs work. We

enjoy working on the house, the yard, the garden, the pool. So these days Arn and I are busy scraping and painting, pruning and mowing and raking, and repairing stone walls. He makes breads and I make soups. We plant bulbs and feed the birds and talk with the neighbors. I go to church meetings and write letters for Amnesty International. He spends Thursday evenings at the Sticky Wicket listening to traditional jazz. On weekends we sometimes have UU bed and breakfast visitors through our listing in Homecomings. And we make frequent trips to Amherst to visit our two little grandsons, about whom I feel just what Pat Kreidler described this morning. We take four and five mile walks, and we watch Mystery and Masterpiece Theater and Washington Week. I read a lot, and make sporadic attempts at getting better organized-- I keep buying books about it! A lifetime's worth of family pictures are waiting to be sorted, labelled and put into albums. And what a great lifetime I've had-- full of love and surprises, good challenges, helpful friends, and UU adventures. At least the first sixty-three years have been great-- mostly.

And so, these days, my answer to my life-long question, What do I believe? is, in part, as follows:

God is the word I use to allude to that source of wonder and mystery that I experience when I contemplate the fact of my existence. I think and therefore I praise.

As I look out upon the process of miracles lightly known as life... as I experience the continuity of my own consciousness, an elusive "self" which apparently transcends the birth and death of cells in my brain... as I consider the sweep of cosmic evolution, of that incredible story of inert matter giving rise to living, feeling, thinking, dreaming creatures... I have a sense of a spiritual reality which is always surging onward and outward. This is the process that I would call God-- creation flowing free.

I have difficulty using God as a noun, for a noun must point to something: person, place or thing, I was once taught. A noun must denote, define, delimit. It has a static quality which does not fit my God-consciousness. To me, God is a verb. Or, to use a metaphor of punctuation, God is not a period but a question mark or an exclamation point. God is not the answer to the mystery of life so much as the acknowledgement of the mystery.

Defying entropy, defying probability, God is the "Life that maketh all things new." When I recognize the presence of God working through me, I live with a sense of high adventure and eternal significance.



Editor's (Daughter's) afterword:

And so, she might have said, there went the next five and a half years.

My mother's last years continued on much as she described her life in 1990. Much to her joy and delight two more grandsons arrived-- another pair of "little boys." Life on Farmer's Cliff Road proceeded quietly, except when grandsons visited! When they did, there was something she might have described as happy clamor.

As Alzheimer's Disease took hold, my mother made adaptations. She worked out systems of reminders, further simplified her daily life, made the decision with Arn that they would stay put in their familiar house and surroundings in Concord. Gradually she relied more and more on Arn to guide her, remind her, keep her oriented-- which he did with patience and tact. Gradually he took over the household chores that they had previously shared, and he made the decisions she could no longer make. Gradually, stepwise, she let go of the many interests and activities she had loved. Between them my parents did an extraordinary job of managing a terribly difficult and tragic disease, keeping interests and connections going as long as possible, and keeping their shared sense of humor.

Losing her memory and her capacity to use her mind was her worst dread come true. Yet, heroically, she took it on just as she had taken on other projects throughout her life. Living with her inevitably worsening illness and preparing herself for death became her last great projects. And even in her last few months, as both her mind and her body failed more rapidly, she somehow retained her essential self. I don't know how she did it. But it was just as she had maintained: "defying entropy, defying probability," she was still that "elusive 'self' which apparently transcends the birth and death of cells in my brain." Her extraordinary self came through over and over again on occasions to which, inexplicably, she rose: to talk with a friend, to attend one last ordination, to go on one last trip. Her family saw what an effort these things were, saw how confused and exhausted she could be, yet clearly to her they were worth every bit of effort.

And at so many moments, she was there! Even toward the end she still found ways to let us know her appreciation, her love for us. She found ways to let us know that she was okay and that we shouldn't worry. One morning in June, when words had become very difficult, she found a moment when she managed to say to her friend Martha, "Well, it looks like I'm dying. I'm ready." Then, finding no further words to express what she wished to communicate, she lifted her hand in the air and drew three exclamation points...!!! I-- and I think I can speak confidently here for family and friends as well-- have come to think of those exclamation points as just three of her many parting gifts to us all.

My mother took on the last of her odyssey with her characteristic determination, courage, dignity, faith, trust, humility, patience, humor, love and energy. Meanwhile, what she would have said was that she could not have done it alone, that she put her faith in the universe to take care of her and her trust in all of us to see her through. And I, in characteristic daughter fashion, could have said, Yes, but! But, Mom... you still have that star in your pocket.

Our love to you, Mom, Ann, at the end of your odyssey.  
Stars to follow.